

**KENT COUNTY
MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL
PARKS STUDY**

FINAL REPORT

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Executive Summary

Kent County is home to over 11,000 acres of parkland and 150 miles of non-motorized local and regional trails that are managed by communities in Kent County. These communities include 21 townships, nine cities, five villages and the County itself. These local units of government provide varying degrees of recreational services and programs. The combined cost of operating and maintaining this network of public spaces and programming exceeds \$22 million per year county-wide.

Faced with ongoing budget challenges Kent County communities have come together to look for ways to share services, increase revenues, combine operations and strengthen parks and recreation services in Kent County. This study is itself a collaborative effort of several communities and private funders. The study provides an analysis of current operations, assets and finances, and explores the potential strategies for parks and recreation collaboration.

Project objectives

Based on needs identified in prior studies, the objectives for this study were:

1. Summarize existing parks and recreation services in Kent County communities, including:
 - a. Agencies
 - b. Programs
 - c. Assets
 - d. Budgets
 - e. Funding mechanisms
2. Identify and evaluate models of collaboration, operational efficiency and funding.
3. Make recommendations for strategies for participating parks and recreation agencies to consider.

This project is not a master planning project in the sense that it was not intended to define a vision for what parks and recreation should be in Kent County. This study looks at what is currently being done and identifies new ways for how Kent County communities can come together to improve operations, reduce costs and expand services. To do this, the study examined parks and recreation systems that are considered model, or “great” systems, with the goal of learning from their governance, funding and management systems with lesser attention paid to specific parks, programs and amenities.

Findings and Conclusions

This report details 28 specific findings that, taken together, describe the current state of parks and recreation in Kent County. The report also examines parks and recreation collaboration in Michigan. An in-depth look at four nationally recognized parks and recreation systems is also provided. This information is summarized in six key conclusions.

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1. Parks and recreation in Kent County is best described as good, not great.
2. There is a broadly shared view that parks and recreation are key to the quality of life in Kent County, but different agencies have different priorities and there is currently no shared vision for a common approach across jurisdictions.
3. Parks and recreation agencies throughout Kent County have faced significant budget reductions. In some jurisdictions, continued economic challenges and associated declines in parks and recreation spending threaten the quality of parks and access to recreation opportunities. At the same time, some communities with dedicated funding sources continue to maintain services in these challenging times.
4. Kent County parks and recreation agencies are relatively efficient.
5. There are strong examples of parks and recreation collaboration in Kent County.
6. In the absence of a collaborative governance structure and new funding sources, consolidation of parks and recreation agencies may yield improvements in recreation programming and some back office operations, but will not yield significant operational efficiencies or cost savings.

Recommendations

Our findings have characterized the state of parks and recreation as good, not great. Our challenge was to find a way to move beyond *good* in an environment where there is no formal mechanism for working together or sharing resources, where millage support has traditionally been focused on specific projects and communities and where there is no community-wide vision for parks and recreation services which would support a request for additional, community-wide resources. In addition, those communities that have supported millages and provided significant support for their parks and recreation programming within their jurisdiction do not want to see that support redirected or diluted. Certainly, communities with parks millages and more resources are not interested in participating in anything that they may perceive as a “bailout” of struggling agencies.

Given the current state of parks and recreation in Kent County, we had to find a solution that benefited all participating agencies, that produced a return on investment for participating agencies greater than what could not be achieved individually, that brought new resources to parks and recreation and that had a governance process that supported shared goals and decision making.

We considered the possibility of consolidating existing agencies but found it failed to achieve the criteria we listed above. As we discuss in Chapter 4, consolidation has a mixed record of success and is extraordinarily hard to do. In the absence of independent governance it is likely to lead to conflicts. In the absence of additional resources, it will produce no significant efficiencies.

Any discussion of additional resources leads to the question of a parks and recreation millage. We have documented in this report that *great* parks and recreation systems have dedicated tax revenue. Our view is that this is something Kent County residents will likely consider in the future, but at present, there is not a shared vision across communities that would generate support for the millage, and the question of how such a millage would be managed so as to add value to all the independent systems and communities remains unresolved.

A strategy for multijurisdictional parks and recreation collaboration

Our research suggests that there is a need to create a new infrastructure for county-wide parks and recreation intergovernmental cooperation that can continue to grow based on experience and need. The new authority can benefit all participating communities and achieve results that could not be achieved by existing agencies working independently. A new authority could also be a mechanism to pursue, accept and distribute public grant monies and private philanthropic support for collaborative projects that reflect the shared vision of the participating communities. At the same time, this new authority does not threaten local control of existing resources.

We see the authority as undertaking projects that add value to participating agencies (and offer six specific suggestions in Recommendation 2). This is an overlay authority. It does not replace or consolidate existing agencies. We see it doing projects that the existing agencies cannot do alone and that could benefit each participating jurisdiction independently and the system as a whole.

A new authority can also be a mechanism to administer a parks and recreation millage should the participating communities decide to do so at some point in the future. While we do not see this as an initial goal, it is a question that may eventually go before the voters should the authority successfully develop a shared vision for parks and recreation across the county.

We believe that the following three broad recommendations are a critical starting point for Kent County communities to join forces to move parks and recreation from *good to great*:

Recommendation 1: Create a Kent Communities Park and Recreation Authority under PA 321.

Recommendation 2: Implement specific, high-value projects, that benefit multiple (all) parks and recreation jurisdictions in Kent County.

Specifically, we recommend that following six projects:

1. Shared parks and recreation web platform
2. Multi-jurisdictional planning
3. Common metrics and reporting
4. Common hiring system for recreation program staff
5. Joint marketing
6. Joint programming (especially for special needs populations)

Recommendation 3: Support the formation of additional multi-jurisdictional authorities where there is a strong case and community support for collaboration.

Participation in the authority is optional and we expect it to take approximately 18 months to implement the authority and to begin funding and implementing projects that benefit parks and recreation in Kent County.

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The Michigan Legislature recognized the need for collaboration in parks and recreation but also understood the enormous barriers to consolidation. The overlay authority allowed under PA 321 was created as a mechanism to address these barriers. Communities can come together to pursue common goals while continuing to support their own agencies.

The Newaygo Community Recreational Authority, formed in 2006, is one of 13 such authorities formed under PA 321 since 2000. Les Salacina, the Brooks Township Supervisor, states that **“the Authority is one of the most positive things we have done for this community. The Authority has allowed us to focus on providing for facilities that affect the entire region while maintaining our own autonomy for township initiatives.”**

The recommendations offered in this study provide a mechanism for Kent County communities to come together to increase revenue, expand services and to undertake projects that benefit the participating communities that could not be accomplished individually. We describe these recommendations as a *collaborative platform* that allows Kent County communities to work together to move parks and recreation from *good* to *great*.

Chapter 1: Project overview, objectives and process

Kent County is home to over 11,000 acres of parkland and 235 miles of trailways, owned and operated by a multitude of municipalities, including 21 townships, nine cities, five villages and the County itself. The communities provide varying degrees of recreational services and programs. The combined cost of operating and maintaining this network of public spaces and programming exceeds \$22 million per year county-wide. Public schools provide over half the public recreation facilities in the County and 10 of 21 school districts offer some form of community recreational programming. In addition to municipal and school facilities and programming, there is a wide variety of non-profit, for-profit and private recreation service providers in Kent County. While these providers add significant breadth and access of services, the focus of this study has been on municipal, and to a lesser degree school, assets and services.

Throughout Michigan, local units of government are seeking to maintain services by identifying efficiencies and improving cost-effectiveness of delivering public service. This includes parks and recreation services. Options being considered include a wide range of possible changes, such as merging departments, creating joint authorities, sharing services, contracting for services, enhancing revenues, increasing operational efficiencies, and a variety of other options.

These and other possible changes are being promoted by the Governor and recent legislative changes have helped ease implementation. Nonetheless they are all easier said than done and there are plenty of examples where the desired benefits were not achieved; but plenty where significant benefits did result.

Before making any changes to parks and recreation programming, the communities of Kent County wisely sought to undertake an analysis of current operations, assets and finances, and explore the potential impacts of changing how services are managed and delivered. Additionally, there was recognition that citizen involvement in the process was critical to its success. For this reason, the County, under the leadership of the Board Chair, appointed a 30-member Citizen's Committee to review findings and provide direction on recommendations that are developed.

This project is a follow-on to the work of prior study groups. In 2010, the Kent County Board of Commissioners, Parks Sub-Committee issued a report calling for further study of parks and recreation collaboration.

It is the conclusion of the subcommittee that while much collaboration has existed in the past, more is possible and expected. It is also the conclusion of the subcommittee that specific resources have to be devoted to identifying additional opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing, including looking not only at the past practices and models that exist within Kent County, but also at other similar systems throughout the state and the country. Finally, the Subcommittee concludes that implementation of any collaborations or resource sharing arrangements must take into consideration and address existing funding streams and funding requirements, as well as community expectations and local priorities.¹

¹ Final Report of the Kent County Board of Commissioners, Parks Sub-Committee. 2010. Page 2.

Project objectives

The prior studies identified the need to have a fuller inventory of parks and recreation assets and services in Kent County. In addition, these studies focused on the need to evaluate models for collaboration. As such, the objectives for this study were:

1. Summarize existing parks and recreation services in Kent County communities, including:
 - a. Agencies
 - b. Programs
 - c. Assets
 - d. Budgets
 - e. Funding mechanisms
2. Identify and evaluate models of collaboration, operational efficiency and funding.
3. Make recommendations for strategies for participating parks and recreation agencies to consider.

Data collection

The first objective, summarize existing P&R services, required a significant amount of data collection and analysis. Information was collected from a number of sources, including:

- A custom survey of all municipal governments in Kent County
- Website reviews of park amenities and recreation programming in each community
- Geographic information system (GIS) databases, from Kent County, the City of Grand Rapids and REGIS
- Personal interviews with local parks and recreation officials
- Prior studies conducted in various communities
- Parks and recreation master plans
- Recreation service guides
- Intergovernmental service agreements
- State of Michigan Treasury databases
- County Equalization
- US Census Bureau
- Interviews and focus groups

Data was compiled and follow-up contacts were made with each community to improve understanding and completeness of information. In a few cases (8 out of 36 communities), we received no response to our requests for information, or the community noted it does not provide any parks amenities or recreation services.

In addition to municipal governments, we also collected recreation and facility information from school districts in the county. The Kent County ISD provided assistance with reaching out to schools for a limited amount of information for this study. Of the 20 school districts in the county, 14 responded to the survey.

Data limitations

Through the surveys and follow-up process, we identified a number of limitations to the data that was provided. In many cases, municipal governments simply do not track information at the level of detail requested. This is due to the challenge of directly segregating costs for services which are often co-provided or comingled with other services that are provided. For example, many smaller municipalities which may maintain a park do so through their department of public works, and the services provided are just to maintain (mow) the parkland which is incorporated into the many duties of maintenance staff. For example, we found it difficult to make a full accounting of parks and recreation assets for a number of the smaller communities because much equipment is shared between departments. Many communities lack park user surveys and recreation participation feedback. We also found it difficult to get specific information on budget reductions, parks and recreation specific liabilities (retiree healthcare, pensions, accrued time off, etc.), and reductions in multi-year capital.

For some communities and schools in Kent County, this information is not available due simply to the smaller size of the parks and recreation operations. We found many examples of resources shared with other internal government functions (public works, general administration, streets, utilities, etc.), which made it difficult to isolate the level of resources allocated specifically to parks and recreation. This was especially true of staffing as municipal and school employees often have other duties and their parks and recreation work is not accounted for separately.

In addition to data not being available, we also encountered challenges with the format of information in different agencies. A primary example of this was in the budget formats utilized. In some communities, parks and/or recreation revenues are combined with other fees and charges, which make it impossible to know how much revenue is generated from parks and recreation services. Similarly, expenditures are reported in a variety of formats. Some communities record employee compensation in a general public works department, even if a portion of employee time is dedicated to parks. Other communities report expenditures by facility, but not by function (maintenance, improvements, direct service delivery, etc.).

Due to the limitations of the data collected, and as a result of the different reporting formats, the level of analysis and detail we had hoped to provide was difficult. However, we were able to compile and compare budgetary, operational and programmatic information that significantly improves the understanding of parks and recreation programming provided throughout the county. The findings resulting from our data collection and analysis are presented below in Chapter 3 of this report.

Also, this study does not include a comprehensive assessment of recreation programs by churches, community-based groups, non-profits (like The Y[®]) and for-profit providers (like athletic clubs). We do make reference to these providers where there is a direct relationship to the municipal and school-based agencies. Our focus was on public park and recreation agencies and schools. It was simply beyond the scope of this study to look at every aspect of recreation programming in the county.

Models of collaboration

We examined the models of parks and recreation collaboration locally and throughout the state. We have paid particular attention to the enabling legislation and the resulting collaborative models. We note two strong examples of inter-jurisdictional collaboration that exists in Kent County. In addition, we summarized the important legislation and offer examples in Chapter 4.

Benchmarking model agencies

The consulting team examined local, state and national models of parks and recreation agencies. We identified several outstanding agencies that excel in parkland under management, park amenities and recreational programming. These are discussed in Chapter 5. It should be noted, we found many examples of collaboration but very few examples of agency consolidation.

Citizens Committee

An integral component of this study has been the regular feedback and insights provided by the Citizens Committee. The committee was comprised of a number of local government parks and recreation officials, recreation enthusiasts, community group representatives and the public. Members of the Citizens Committee included:

- Stacie Behler – Meijer, Trails Enthusiast
- Rosalynn Bliss – City Grand Rapids
- Sandi Frost Parrish (Citizens Committee Chair) – Kent County Board of Commissioners
- Mike DeVries – Grand Rapids Township
- Brian Donovan – City of East Grand Rapids
- Mark Fitzpatrick – Ada Township
- Andy Guy – Wondergem / Friends of Grand Rapids Parks
- Jerry Hale – Lowell Township
- Bryan Harrison – Caledonia Township
- Rich Houtteman – City of Kentwood
- Andy Johnston – Lowell Resident
- Ron Koehler – Kent ISD
- Ken Krombeen – City of Grandville
- Mick McGraw – Eastbrook Homes
- Chris Muller – M Retail, River Enthusiast
- Greg Northrup – West Michigan Strategic Alliance
- Steve Peterson – Cascade Township
- Charles Porter – Courtland Township
- Milt Rohwer – Frey Foundation
- Daryl Ross – Lighthouse Community Center
- Rebecca Rynbrandt – City of Wyoming
- Carlos Sanchez – Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- Dave Schaffer – City of Grand Rapids
- John Schneider – Clark Hill - Kent County Parks Foundation, Blandford Nature Center

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- Eddie Tadlock – SMG
- Sue Thomas – Alpine Township (Planner)
- Cathy VanderMeulen – City of Walker
- Mike Wawee Jr. – Kent County
- Doug Wustman – City of Wyoming
- Michael Young, – City of Rockford
- Jason Zylstra – RDV Family Foundation

Over the course of the study, the Citizens Committee was convened four times. At each meeting, the project team provided an update on project status including findings, conclusions and recommendations. Members of the committee provided feedback, clarification and questions to help refine and guide the progress. Committee members also met with the project team in small groups to review interim work and validate information. These small group meetings were critical in helping to focus on the best options available for improving parks and recreation service delivery that were specific to the needs and interests of the citizens of Kent County. These meetings were essential in helping to define the final recommendations of this study.

The project was also supported by the Staff Committee of senior staff of park and recreation agencies and county administration. This group help coordinate data collection, reviewed interim reports, validated information and provided substantial support. The consultants are extraordinarily grateful for the thoughtful feedback and generous time commitments made by these individuals.

- Jennifer DeHaan, Kent County Administrator's Office
- Mark Fitzpatrick, Ada Township Parks and Recreation
- Amanda Gerhardt, Cedar Springs Parks and Recreation Authority
- Kendall Klingelsmith, City of Kentwood Parks and Recreation
- Rebecca Rynbrandt, City of Wyoming
- Roger Sabine, Kent County Parks
- Jay Steffen, City of Grand Rapids
- Mary Swanson, Kent County Administrator's Office
- Charlie Ziesemer, City of Kentwood Parks and Recreation

Project Funding

This study was completed with funding provided by the following partners: Grand Rapids Community Foundation, Dyer-Ives Foundation, Frey Foundation, City of Wyoming, City of Grand Rapids, Kent County, and the State of Michigan Economic Vitality Incentive Program.

The report that follows is a summary of the work that has been described here.

Chapter 2: The Benefits of Parks and Recreation

At the dawn of the industrial world a few visionaries had the foresight to see the need for parks as a respite from the crowded, dirty, noisy, landscape of industry, commerce and urban housing. The great urban parks of our big cities became the model for parks across the country. At the same time, others had the foresight to work to preserve vast tracks of our disappearing natural landscape. Our earliest national parks became the inspiration for thousands of state parks and local preserves. After World War II, our thinking about active recreation began to evolve and modern parks and recreation agencies began to emerge. More recently, we began to see parks as an important aspect of a sustainable environment.

Today, parks and recreation is a vital element of a healthy, vibrant community. The agencies charged with managing our parks and delivering essential community services contribute to the health, economic vitality, environmental quality and social fabric of communities.

Public Health Benefits

The growing health crisis in this country is well documented. Simply put, we eat more and move less. The consequences are seen in the individual health and in the cost we all must bear to provide healthcare related to chronic, largely preventable diseases. A writer for the National Recreation and Parks Association provides a clear description of the natural partnership between parks and recreation and public health.

A growing number of physicians and pediatricians are looking to parks as natural partners in the fight against chronic disease and obesity. These physicians are recognizing the exceptional health benefits of using parks and trails to improve one's health. Many have embraced the concept of "Park Prescriptions," that is an actual prescription from a doctor to direct patients to engage in a specific amount of daily physical activity, which can be achieved by walking in parks or on public trails. Additionally, some doctors are putting skin in the game by coming out to parks and showing by their own example that walking and spending time outdoors is great for one's health.

Parks and public lands have long been associated with higher physical activity levels, but are now also associated with greater feelings of revitalization, energy, and perceptions of improved health. Prescribing parks as a solution for improving health offers affordable, accessible health benefits to people of all ages, abilities and incomes, and it can produce outstanding results in promoting healthy behaviors and preventing chronic disease conditions.²

Economic Benefits

John Crompton, a professor at Texas A&M University, completed a meta-analysis of research on the economic impact of open space. His analysis confirmed that open space contributed to property values, and that this finding was supported by 20 of the 25 studies that

² <http://www.nrpa.org/Blog/Doctors-Prescribe-Parks-for-Health/>

sought to determine the economic impact of parks. “The real estate market consistently demonstrates that many people are willing to pay a larger amount for property located close to parks and open space areas than for a home that does not offer this amenity,” writes Crompton.³ With higher property values, residents are paying higher property taxes which in turn can be a substantial benefit to local government. For example, a study by Michigan State University found that properties situated in Oakland County and located within 75 to 150 meters from recreational lands benefit from a \$5,636 gain in property value.⁴

The Trust for Public Land cited a survey, conducted by the National Association of Realtors by Public Opinion Strategies, which revealed that “50 percent of respondents said they would be willing to pay 10 percent more for a house located near a park or other protected open space” while “57 percent of respondents said that if they were in the market to buy a new home, they would be more likely to select one neighborhood over another if it was close to parks and open space.”⁵

Not only does proximity to open space, parks, and recreation increase property values, it has a positive effect on commercial property values as well. Businesses seek out areas that offer natural outdoor amenities for their employees and customers. There are numerous examples in which commercial property has benefited, and one such example is Bryant Park located in New York City. Once a rundown area saturated with crime, this fairly new park underwent a 12-year renovation and has now become the site of major fashion shows, outdoor movies, jazz festivals, an outdoor café, and thousands of park visitors each day.⁶

As we will discuss in this report, in economically challenging times, parks and recreation budgets become an easy target for spending reductions. While the direct effects on parks and recreation programming are obvious, the broader effects on economic vitality of a community must also be considered. This point was discussed in the recent newsletter of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Just as well-maintained parks can support the economy, poorly-maintained ones can be dangerous, and impact community health. “To capture the economic benefits of parks, however, a city must invest in their upkeep. Parks help the economy when they are well maintained and well used. They can have a negative effect when they are neglected, attracting vandalism, drug-dealing and other crime. During the New York City fiscal crisis of the 1970s and ‘80s, dirty, worn and dangerous parks became a potent symbol of the city’s decline.”

Furthermore, parks in disrepair can also negatively impact real estate values: “Many of the neighborhoods surrounding these parks have been affected disproportionately by the mortgage crisis and declining real estate prices. Given the economic benefits of well-used and maintained parks — and the increased need for free recreation and relaxation during a time of financial stress for many residents — can the city afford to pare down the parks budget further?”⁷

³ Crompton, John L. *The Impact of Parks and Open Space on Property Values and the Property Tax Base* (Ashburn, VA.: National Recreation and Park Association, 2000), p.1.

⁴ Land Policy Institute at Michigan State University, *Building Prosperous Places in Michigan: Understanding the Value of, Perception of, and Barriers to Place Making. A Case Study of 3 Cities: Lansing, Traverse City, and Royal Oak*. 2012. <http://www.landpolicy.msu.edu>.

⁵ Sherer, Paul. *The Benefits of Parks: Why America Needs More City Parks and Open Space* (San Francisco, CA: The Trust for Public Land 2006), p. 16.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 17.

⁷ <http://dirt.asla.org/2009/08/28/the-economic-benefits-of-parks/>

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A park is not only a destination for outdoor recreation, an escape of the hustle and bustle of the city, or a place for reflection, but also becomes a marketing tool for a community to attract tourism, conventions, and businesses. Many municipalities utilize their parks to hold special events such as art festivals, athletic events, musical and theatrical events, and food festivals. A few examples of communities that have recognized the economic impact of athletic events include Rockford, Waukegan and Schaumburg IL, Aiken SC, Henderson NV, and Chattanooga TN. All of these can bring a significant economic benefit that will in turn affect their community. Such events can bring tourists that will stay at hotels, eat at restaurants, and shop at local stores.⁸

A vibrant parks and recreation system is an important element in attracting new businesses and the talent they need to thrive. The impact of parks and recreation on economic development was discussed several times in the Citizens Committee meetings. This is clearly a community interest and investment in parks and recreation should be considered an investment in economic development.

Environmental Benefits

Green spaces in urban and metropolitan areas can have a significant positive impact on the environment. Not only do they generate a substantial amount of oxygen, they also reduce air pollution, play a major role in storm water management, and help control soil erosion. Improving air and water quality through open space has an economic benefit as well. These spaces can dramatically reduce the cost of engineered solutions necessary to manage problems and meet federal mandates.

In 1994, trees in New York City were responsible for the removal of an estimated 1,821 metric tons of air pollution. In densely tree populated areas, trees can remove as much as 15 percent of the ozone, 14 percent of sulfur dioxide, 13 percent of particulate matter, and .05 percent of carbon monoxide.⁹

Trees can absorb excessive nutrients that pollute streams and keep it from reaching storm sewers. They also serve as natural air conditioners and can keep larger cities and towns cool from the summer sun. "The evaporation from a single large tree can produce the cooling effect of ten room-sized air conditioners operating 24 hours a day."¹⁰

In fact trees have many important environmental benefits. The US Forest Service notes that benefits from trees include the following:

Local climate and energy use—Trees influence thermal comfort, energy use, and air quality by providing shade, transpiring moisture, and reducing wind speeds. The establishment of 100 million mature trees around residences in the United States is said to save about \$2 billion annually in reduced energy costs.

Air quality—Trees improve air quality by lowering air temperatures, altering emissions from building energy use and other sources, and removing air pollutants through their

⁸ Paul Sherer, *The Benefits of Parks: Why America Needs More City Parks and Open Space* (San Francisco, CA: The Trust for Public Land 2006), p. 19.

⁹ David J. Nowak, "The Effects of Urban Trees on Air Quality" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service), <http://www.fs.fed.us/ne/syracuse/gif/trees/pdf>

¹⁰ Sherer. p. 20.

leaves. Urban trees in the conterminous United States remove some 784,000 tons of air pollution annually, with a value of \$3.8 billion.

Climate change—Urban trees can affect climate change by directly storing carbon within their tissues and by reducing carbon emissions from power plants through lowered building energy use. Urban trees in the conterminous United States currently store 770 million tons of carbon, valued at \$14.3 billion.

Water flow and quality—Trees and soils improve water quality and reduce the need for costly storm water treatment (the removal of harmful substances washed off roads, parking lots, and roofs during rain/snow events), by intercepting and retaining or slowing the flow of precipitation reaching the ground. During an intense storm in Dayton, OH, for example, the tree canopy was estimated to reduce potential runoff by 7 percent.

Noise abatement—Properly designed plantings of trees and shrubs can significantly reduce noise. Wide plantings (around 100 ft.) of tall dense trees combined with soft ground surfaces can reduce apparent loudness by 50 percent or more (6 to 10 decibels).

Wildlife and biodiversity—Urban forests help create and enhance animal and plant habitats and can act as “reservoirs” for endangered species. Urban forest wildlife offer enjoyment to city dwellers and can serve as indicators of local environmental health.¹¹

Soil quality—Trees and other plants help remediate soils at landfills and other contaminated sites by absorbing, transforming, and containing a number of contaminants.

But of course, trees are not the only environmental benefit of parks. Parks are an essential buffer to urban development and suburban sprawl. They provide an important buffer and help us preserve a diminishing natural environment. For many, experiences in parks are the most important connection to the natural environment they have. The experiences of children and adults have in parks builds a wider appreciation for our connection to the natural world and a duty to be responsible stewards of these precious assets.

Social Benefits

A significant benefit of parks and recreation is that it can make urban and suburban neighborhoods more livable by providing recreational opportunities to residents of all economic levels and physical abilities, at-risk youth, and individuals of all ages. Parks and recreation facilities provide a place for people to go to experience a sense of community. Public parks also provide affordable recreational opportunities for low-income families and teens with limited resources.

As mentioned previously, access to parks is important for increasing physical activity. Additionally, access to parks reduces crime, especially cases of juvenile delinquency. Recreation Centers provide a safe place for at-risk youth to participate in activities with their peers while keeping them off the streets and away from behaviors that would get them into

¹¹ Nowak, David J., et al. Sustaining America's Urban Trees and Forests. United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Research Station. General Technical Report NRS-62. June 2010

trouble.¹² According to the After School Alliance, “more than 15 million school-age children in the U.S. are on their own after school.”¹³

In addition to the positive influence of parks and recreation to low-income areas and at-risk youth, there is also a benefit for small children and the impact of play on their learning. Play allows children to not only become more physically healthy, it also helps them to develop their language, coordination, cognitive thinking and reasoning abilities. “Play also teaches children how to interact and cooperate with others, laying foundations for success in school and the working world.”¹⁴

Lastly, research shows that individuals living in neighborhoods that boast green space are more likely to enjoy social ties than those that are surrounded by concrete and little common green space. In a study conducted by the University of Illinois and the University of Chicago, “in inner-city neighborhoods where common spaces are often barren no-man’s lands, the presence of trees and grass supports common space use and informal social contact among neighbors.” Additionally, “vegetation and neighborhood social ties were significantly related to residents’ senses of safety and adjustment.”¹⁵

Summary

There is overwhelming evidence that supports the many benefits to parks and recreation. Our parks are much more than a place for refuge. Today’s parks and recreation agencies improve our overall physical and psychological wellbeing, make our communities a more desirable place to work and live, make our communities stronger and help sustain our natural environment.

¹² Peter A. Witt and John L. Crompton, “The At-risk Youth Recreation Project,” *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 14, no. 13, 1996: 1-9. For a version of this paper, see <http://www.rpts.tamu.edu/Faculty/Witt/wittpub5.htm>

¹³ Afterschool Alliance. *The Afterschool Hours in America*. 2009 (updated 2011): p. 1, <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org>.

¹⁴ Joan Packer Isenberg and Nancy Quisenberry, “Play: Essential For All Children,” *Association for Childhood Education International*, 2002, <http://www.udel.edu/bateman/acei/playpaper.htm>

¹⁵ . Frances E. Kuo et al., “Fertile Ground for Community: Inner-City Neighborhood Common Spaces,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 26, no. 6 (1998), <http://webs.aces.uiuc.edu/herl/docs/KuoSulColeyBrunson>.

Chapter 3: Findings – Parks and Recreation in Kent County

Finding 1: Parks and recreation spending by municipalities in Kent County declined 5.9% between 2009 and 2011.

Spending on parks and recreation services tends to fluctuate from year-to-year, often based on capital spending or program costs. A review of expenditure data submitted by each community to the State for 2009 and 2011 suggests overall spending in the county has decreased almost 6% over that time period. As shown in Table 3.1, there is a significant amount of variability in the level of spending between these years. The decreases in spending are most noticeable in the larger budgets, which tend to drive the county-wide totals. Recent cost cutting efforts in the City of Grand Rapids are most notable in the data presented.

This finding suggests many parks and recreation operations have been made more “lean” in recent years. Discussions with local officials support this finding, and many communities noted that further budget reductions will most certainly result in noticeable reductions in services and programs.

Exhibit 3.1 details spending changes by community from 2009 to 2011. This information is extracted from the State of Michigan F65 database which provides uniform account reporting from Michigan municipalities.

KENT COUNTY MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY

Exhibit 3.1
Comparison of Parks and Recreation Expenditures by Community
2009 – 2011

Municipality	2009 Expenditures	2011 Expenditures	Difference	% Diff.
Kent County	\$4,302,352	\$3,864,019	-\$438,333	-10.2%
Ada Township	\$310,856	\$320,220	\$9,364	3.0%
Algoma Township	\$55,579	\$56,535	\$956	1.7%
Alpine Township	\$34,575	\$24,452	-\$10,123	-29.3%
Byron Township	\$395,848	\$672,870	\$277,022	70.0%
Caledonia Township	\$52,900	\$5,520	-\$47,380	-89.6%
Cannon Township	\$18,778	\$37,061	\$18,283	97.4%
Cascade Township	\$132,347	\$41,523	-\$90,824	-68.6%
Cedar Springs	\$49,514	\$155,359	\$105,845	213.8%
East Grand Rapids	\$1,748,714	\$1,662,343	-\$86,371	-4.9%
Gaines Township	\$31,420	\$15,241	-\$16,179	-51.5%
Grand Rapids City	\$8,266,701	\$6,747,077	-\$1,519,624	-18.4%
Grand Rapids Township	\$11,879	\$40,487	\$28,608	240.8%
Grandville	\$806,666	\$507,952	-\$298,714	-37.0%
Kentwood	\$970,220	\$1,795,363	\$825,143	85.0%
Lowell City	\$160,803	\$176,778	\$15,975	9.9%
Lowell Township	\$27,212	\$20,712	-\$6,500	-23.9%
Nelson Township	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$0	0.0%
Plainfield Township	\$191,743	\$175,775	-\$15,968	-8.3%
Rockford	\$148,981	\$148,500	-\$481	-0.3%
Solon Township	\$4,000	\$3,700	-\$300	-7.5%
Tyrone Township	\$7,392	\$0	-\$7,392	-100.0%
Vergennes Township	\$1,500	\$2,500	\$1,000	66.7%
Walker	\$1,684,069	\$1,532,450	-\$151,619	-9.0%
Wyoming	\$4,369,407	\$4,384,112	\$14,705	0.3%
Total	\$23,787,456	\$22,394,549	-\$1,392,907	-5.9%

Source: State of Michigan F-65 database.

Note: municipalities with no data or missing data have been omitted.

Finding 2: Per capita spending on parks and recreation varies substantially among communities in Kent County.

The level of expenditure on parks and recreation activities in each community in Kent County is noticeably variable. As seen in Table 3.2, per capita outlays range from \$0.10 to over \$155. This wide range of expenditures may suggest there is a significant difference in the value each community places on this public service or on government services in general.

KENT COUNTY MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY

Alternatively, the finding may support the notion that people living in more urban areas are more willing to invest in outdoor recreation spaces and recreational programs, than those living in more rural areas.

Generally speaking, we found that spending in urban areas is greater than in rural areas, and the communities with the greater per capita spending are located immediately adjacent to Grand Rapids, the population center of the county (see Exhibit 3.2).

Exhibit 3.2
Per capita Parks and Recreation Spending by Community
2011

Municipality	2010 Population	2011 Expenditures	\$/pop.
Kent County	602,622	\$3,864,019	\$6.41
Ada Township	13,142	\$320,220	\$24.37
Algoma Township	9,932	\$56,535	\$5.69
Alpine Township	13,336	\$24,452	\$1.83
Byron Township	20,317	\$672,870	\$33.12
Caledonia Township	10,821	\$5,520	\$0.51
Caledonia Village	1,511	\$150	\$0.10
Cannon Township	13,336	\$37,061	\$2.78
Cascade Township	17,134	\$41,523	\$2.42
Cedar Springs	3,509	\$155,359	\$44.27
East Grand Rapids	10,694	\$1,662,343	\$155.45
Gaines Township	25,146	\$15,241	\$0.61
Grand Rapids City	188,040	\$6,747,077	\$35.88
Grand Rapids Township	16,661	\$40,487	\$2.43
Grandville	15,378	\$507,952	\$33.03
Kentwood	48,707	\$1,795,363	\$36.86
Lowell City	3,783	\$176,778	\$46.73
Lowell Township	5,949	\$20,712	\$3.48
Nelson Township	4,264	\$4,000	\$0.94
Plainfield Township	30,952	\$175,775	\$5.68
Rockford	5,719	\$148,500	\$25.97
Sand Lake Village	500	\$14,306	\$28.61
Solon Township	5,974	\$3,700	\$0.62
Sparta Village	4,140	\$59,712	\$14.42
Vergennes Township	4,189	\$2,500	\$0.60
Walker	23,537	\$1,532,450	\$65.11
Wyoming	72,125	\$4,384,112	\$60.78
Total	602,622	\$22,468,717	\$37.28

Source: State of Michigan F-65 database.

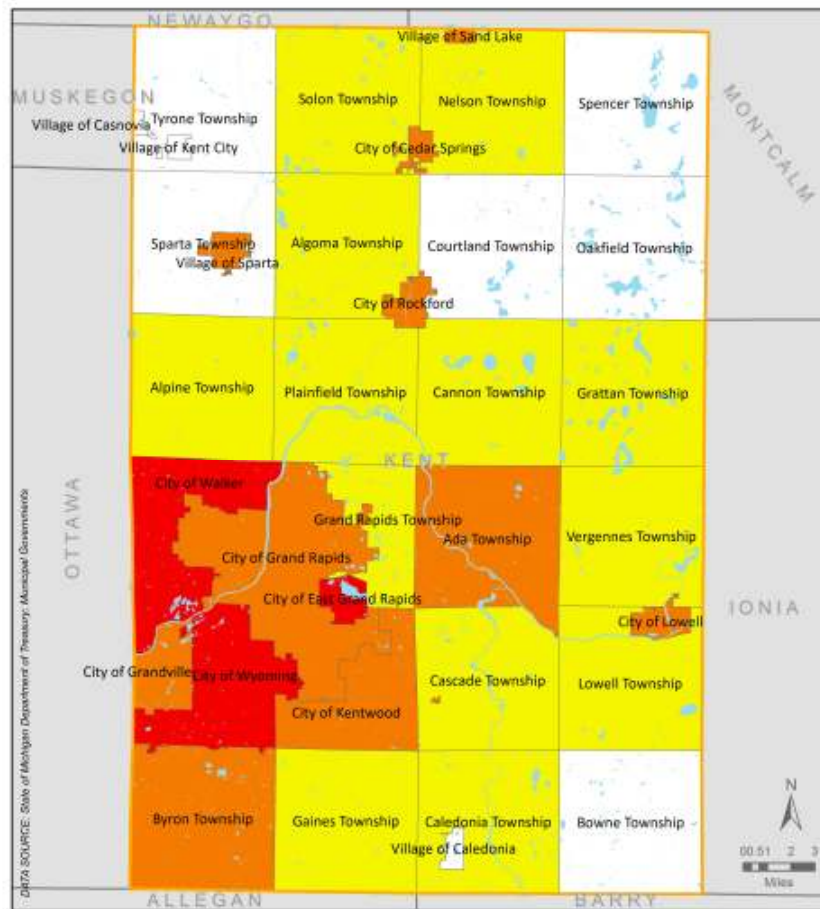
Note: municipalities with no data or missing data have been omitted.

KENT COUNTY MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY

Exhibit 3.3 provides a map of Kent County with parks and recreation spending per capita indicated for each municipality.

Exhibit 3.3
Map of Per Capita Spending on Parks and Recreation by Municipality
2011

**Per Capita Expenditures
for Parks & Recreation, 2011**



KENT COUNTY MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY

Finding 3: Per capita parks and recreation spending in Kent County is lower than averages reported by the National Recreation and Parks Association.

As noted, the per capita level of parks and recreation spending in Kent County varies significantly among municipalities. When viewed county-wide, the level of expenditure is about \$37 per person. This compares to a national average of \$63 per person (see Exhibit 3.4). These averages do not take into account variances related to rural or urban areas or the amount of passive or active park land.

We should note that the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) data may be skewed to larger agencies, and may not include the same mix of small/rural and large/urban parks operations that are present in Kent County. However, even when we break down the different types of municipalities, Kent communities report lower than average spending.

While it may be difficult to achieve a true “apples to-apples” comparison with national data, the comparison does suggest that Kent communities are either providing services more efficiently or at a lower level than other agencies across the country.

Exhibit 3.4
Comparison of Per Capita Parks and Recreation Spending in Kent County to National Averages 2011

Jurisdiction Type	Kent County	NRPA Average
All	\$37.28	\$63.00
County	\$6.41	\$12.00
Township	\$7.52	\$27.00
City (>200,000 pop.)	\$45.48	\$69.00

Finding 4: Spending for parks and recreation in Kent County is lower per capita than in comparable Michigan Counties.

Moving from national data to Michigan-specific numbers, we can see in Table 3.4 that county-wide spending in Kent County is comparable to neighboring Ottawa County, 40% above Macomb County and well below Washtenaw and Oakland Counties. Also noted is the change in county-wide parks and recreation expenditures between 2009 and 2011. The decrease in municipal spending on parks in Kent County is the second lowest of the counties surveyed, and about one-half of the decrease seen in comparable counties.

Often, Washtenaw County and Oakland County are viewed as the counties in Michigan with the most successful and vibrant parks and recreation services. Similar to the differences noted in spending among communities in Kent County, the difference between counties in-whole may also reflect the preferences of the populations who live in those counties. Based on the per capita spending numbers below, it would appear the residents of Oakland and Washtenaw counties are willing to spend substantially more than other counties to achieve a

KENT COUNTY MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY

higher level of services and greater accessibility to recreation opportunities. These numbers include millages passed by voters in Oakland and Washtenaw counties.

Exhibit 3.5 details total parks and recreation spending in communities located within Kent, Washtenaw, Oakland, Macomb and Ottawa counties.

Exhibit 3.5
Parks and Recreation Spending in Comparable Michigan Counties
2011

Countywide Spending	2011 P&R Expenditures	2010 Population	\$/person	Change 2009-2011
Kent County	\$22,468,717	602,622	\$37.28	-5.9%
Washtenaw County	\$29,041,174	344,791	\$84.23	-13.7%
Oakland County	\$85,671,449	1,202,362	\$71.25	-10.0%
Macomb County	\$22,103,181	840,978	\$26.28	-5.3%
Ottawa County	\$9,708,424	263,801	\$36.80	-15.9%
Average of comparables	\$36,631,057	662,983	\$55.25	-11.2%

Sources: F-65 Database; US Census

Note: some communities not reporting expenditures

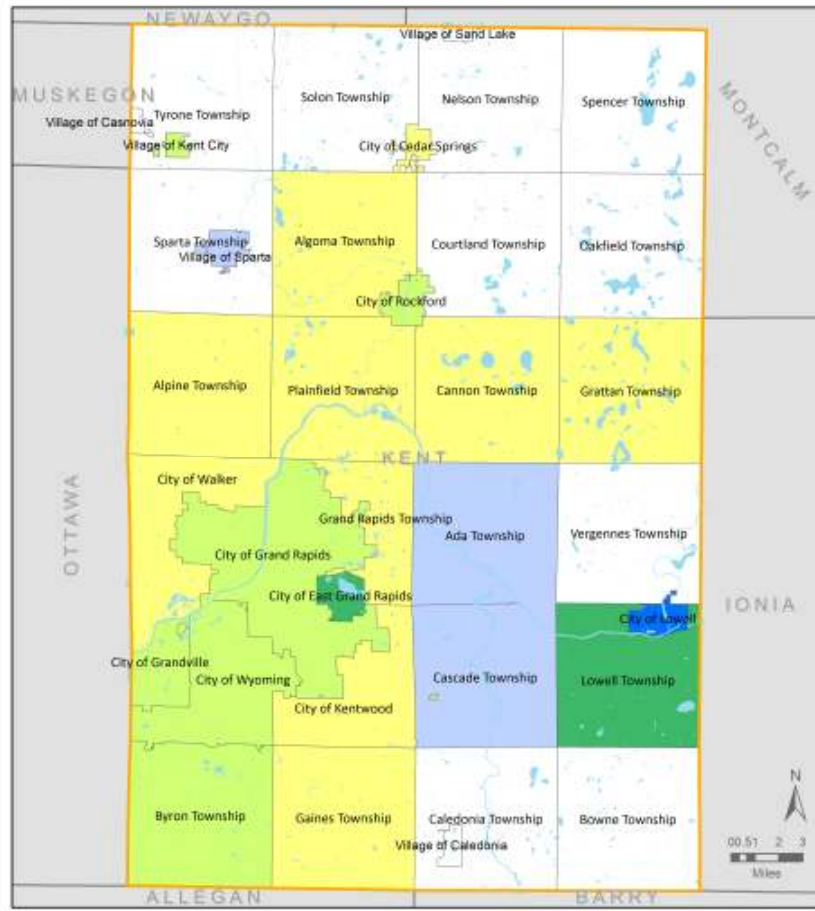
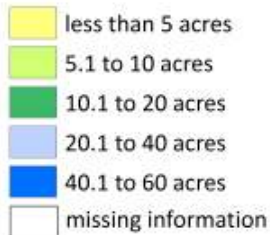
Finding 5: Acres of parkland per population varies substantially between communities.

A common measure of access to public parks is the number of acres per 1,000 population in a given community. As illustrated in Exhibit 3.6, there is considerable variability of this measurement among Kent County municipalities, and several communities with high acreage tend to increase the countywide average. However, we present these comparisons to illustrate the different levels of parkland available across the entire county. Of the 22 communities for which we were able to obtain data, 10 localities have fewer than 5 acres of parks per 1,000 population, while six communities have between 5 and 10 acres. The communities with the highest level of parks acreage per person tend to be near the population centers of the county.

It is not surprising that locations with higher population density have a greater degree of publicly-owned land set aside for recreation and outdoor enjoyment.

Exhibit 3.6
Per Capita Municipal-Owned Acres of Parkland
2011

**Acres of Parkland
Owned by the Municipality
Per 1000 Population**



In addition to municipal-owned parks, we also considered the availability of County-owned and State-owned parks in each community (State game areas are not included). Exhibit 3.7 includes this additional land in the per capita equation. There is a noticeable difference between this figure and Exhibit 3.6. Clearly, County and State lands add a significant number of acres to the total parkland in Kent County. In comparing the two figures, it is interesting to note that the number of acres of parks for most communities increases when State and County lands are included in the equation. Some communities, however, do not show much of an increase in per capita parkland, suggesting there are fewer acres of State and County parks in those communities.

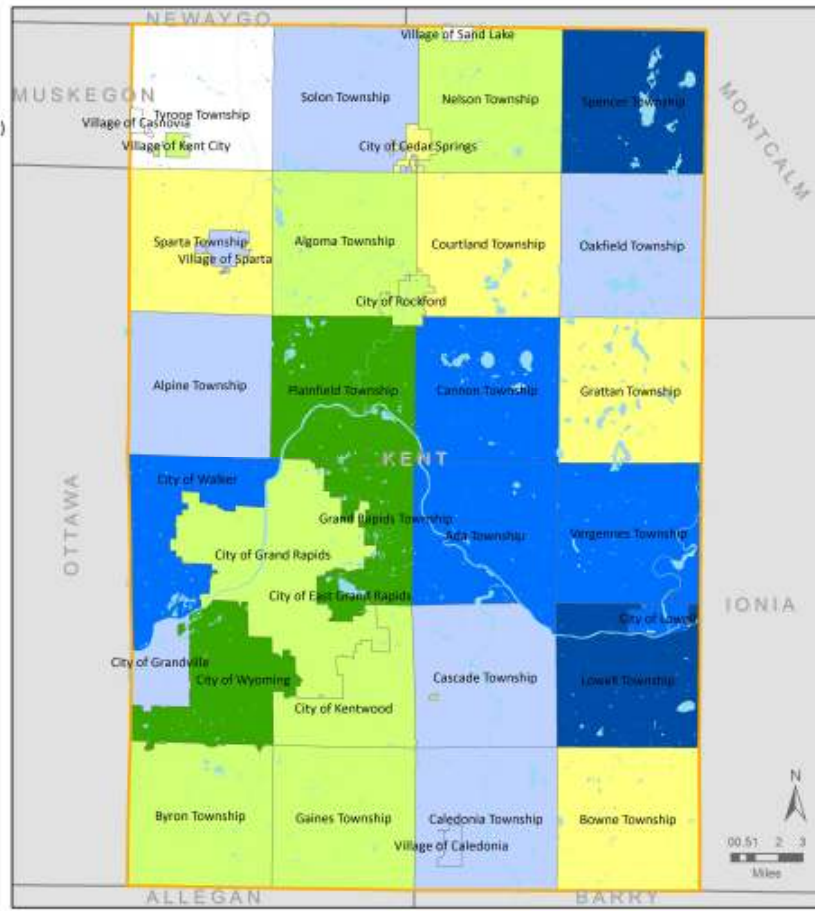
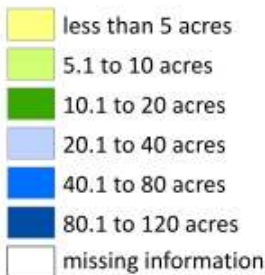
Many of the parks and recreation master plans in Kent County communities include a goal of acquiring additional parkland. This is a reflection of the value residents put on parks, and recognition of the value parks add to a community.

KENT COUNTY MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY

Exhibit 3.7
Per Capita Parkland, Including State and County Parks
2011

**Acres of Parkland
Located in the Municipality
Per 1000 Population**

(includes Kent County and State, except Game Areas)



Finding 6: Acres of parkland (all types) per 1000 population in Kent County exceeds the national average.

When viewed county-wide, Kent County currently offers an estimated 19 acres/1,000 population (not including State game areas). This compares to a national average of 16 acres/1,000 population¹⁶. The National Parks and Recreation Association standard is a minimum of 10 acres/1,000 population.

The 19 acres of parkland per 1,000 population reflects the benefits of cooperation in providing this valuable resource to county residents. Kent County has established a goal of providing 10 acres per thousand residents. The majority of the remaining 19 acres is comprised

¹⁶ National averages are 2011 data from the National Recreation and Parks Association.

Finding 7: Most jurisdictions in Kent County are involved in some form of inter-agency cooperation or service sharing.

A substantial level of inter-jurisdictional cooperation in parks and recreation agencies exists in Kent County – and has for some time. Some of the relationships are formalized through inter-local agreements, facility use agreements and other forms of contract. In addition, some jurisdictions report informal inter-jurisdictional relationships that operate without written agreements.

Kent County is home to two multi-jurisdictional authorities. Both are formed under the Michigan Urban Cooperation Act (1967 PA 7). In 1994, the City of Cedar Springs, Algoma, Courtland, Nelson and Solon townships, and the Cedar Springs Public School District joined together to establish what is now the Cedar Springs Area Parks and Recreation Commission. The Commission was created for the purpose of planning, operating and providing park and recreational programs and services for the citizens of the participating jurisdictions.

In 2004, Vergennes and Lowell Township and the City of Lowell came together to form the Lowell Area Recreation Authority. The authority is charged with developing a new non-motorized trailway that connects all three municipalities. Under the inter-local agreement, the authority can purchase and acquire property, build and operate trails, hire employees, and seek and accept funding (including private donations and grants). The authority is directed by a seven-member board consisting of officials from each township board, the city council and area residents. In 2010, the authority announced that it had raised nearly \$1.1 million for the construction of a new trail.

Schools play an important role in recreation programming in Kent County. (See Findings 13 – 15 for greater discussion of schools.) Six of the fourteen school jurisdictions responding to our survey reported sharing recreation programming with other units of local government. These relationships ranged from facility use agreements to joint recreation programming. Included in this programming is after school programming.

A variety of cooperative arrangements exist for building and grounds maintenance. For example, The City of East Grand Rapids maintains most (not EGR High) of the school athletic fields and coordinates use of those facilities for recreation programming.

Local units of government also cooperate with nonprofit groups on facility use and programming. Plainfield and Grand Rapids Townships, and the partner with the YMCA. Kentwood, Wyoming and Grand Rapids partner with the Kroc Center. Several townships partner with youth athletic associations. Grand Rapids Township partners with the Forest Hills Aquatic Club.

The June, 2010 report of the Kent County Board of Commissioners Parks Subcommittee lists 28 examples of collaboration. Most of these examples are joint land acquisition or development of parks.

While the formality and focus of these partnerships vary, we found that most jurisdictions that participated in this study were engaged in some level of cooperation with some other jurisdiction or service provider. Where economics, geography, capacity and needs align, cooperative relationships are being pursued for parks and recreation in Kent County.

Finding 8: Budget challenges make obvious the need for increased collaboration between jurisdictions but have the effect of reducing the capacity for collaboration.

No one we spoke with questioned the value of collaboration and most indicated they would like to do more. Unfortunately, collaboration requires a substantial amount of staff time to plan, implement and manage. Budget reductions lead to contraction of services. This results in a tendency to focus more narrowly on maintaining core services and not on meetings and projects involving other jurisdictions. As one recreation staff person put it in one of our focus groups, “We used to do more, but we seem to be doing less collaboration during the economic downturn.”

In years past, all parks and recreation directors met on a periodic basis. They looked for ways to collaborate and share services. This group no longer meets. Recreation staff used to meet across jurisdictions as well but no longer do.

Staffing reductions play a role in the decline of inter-jurisdictional meetings. These reductions are most notable in larger jurisdictions. The City of Grand Rapids has seen its Parks and Recreation staff reduced by nearly half since 2010. In 2010 the City of Grand Rapids had 27 staff members in Parks and Recreation. By 2011 that had been reduced to 15.5 full-time equivalent employees (FTEs). The City of Wyoming had 26 FTE's in 2009. Today there are 21. East Grand Rapids reduced from six to five FTEs in 2010. Kentwood had eight FTEs in 2007. Today there are six.

The impact of reduced allocations to parks and recreation varies by community. Our data does not include information on how budget reductions were achieved. Beyond staffing, there may have been cuts to park maintenance, equipment acquisition, and recreation programs and land acquisition. The full effect of these budget cuts was not determined in this study.

Finding 9: Capital expenditures can significantly increase a municipal parks and recreation budget in a given year.

As noted previously, spending on local parks and recreation can fluctuate significantly year-to-year. A major factor in this variability is capital expenditures. The budgets reviewed as part of this study suggest capital investment in park development can easily exceed the operating budget of smaller agencies. For this reason, it is important that agencies improve capital planning.

Our research found that the majority of parks and recreation departments surveyed do not have a fully developed capital improvement plan. Nor do they have a well-defined and managed asset schedule. Both of these tools can be valuable resources when trying to manage limited financial capacity to serve multiple competing needs in a government operation. With improved capital planning it is possible more agencies could secure grant funding or pursue successful fundraising strategies for public improvements. Outside funding of capital is an effective approach to freeing up municipal resources for improved maintenance and operational budgets.

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Finding 10: The largest source of funding for parks and recreation agencies in Kent County is the general fund (nearly 50%).

Revenues to support parks and recreation operations come from a variety of sources, including general taxes, dedicated taxes, fees and charges, grants, and other sources. By far, the majority of revenues come from taxes, with the greatest portion of funding from general operating taxes. This finding is not surprising, given that most parks and recreation budgets in Kent County communities are included as part of the General Fund.

Exhibit 3.9 illustrates the aggregate county-wide revenue sources for parks and recreation departments. Clearly, general taxes account for nearly 50% of revenues. On a more community-specific level, some departments are funded almost entirely with dedicated tax dollars, while others rely much more heavily on fees and charges. Grant revenues are typically dedicated to capital projects.

Exhibit 3.9
Sources of Parks and Recreation Funding for Kent County Agencies
2011

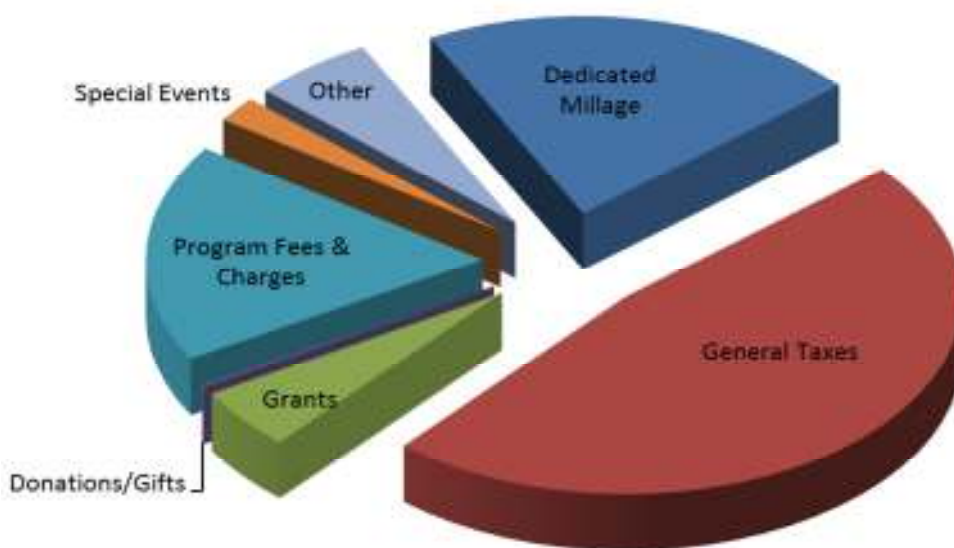


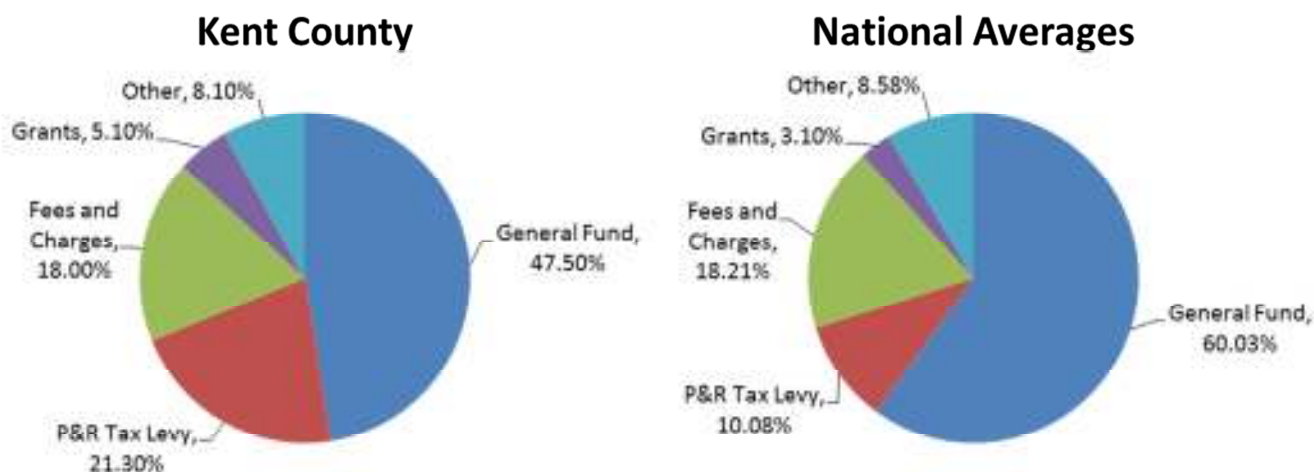
Exhibit 3.10 illustrates the variability of general tax support of parks and recreation operations across the county. Most communities for which data was available rely on general tax dollars for the majority of parks and recreation funding. The City of Wyoming, which has the largest parks and recreation budget in the county, relies heavily on a special millage (and receives no general tax support) to fund its operations.

KENT COUNTY MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY

Finding 11: Local parks and recreation millages are a higher percentage of total parks and recreation revenue in Kent County than the national average.

The comparison of revenue sources presented in Exhibit 3.11 suggests the overall mix of tax and non-tax revenues in Kent County is very comparable to the national average. The one noticeable difference between the two charts is the use of dedicated versus general tax dollars. Kent communities overall have twice the level of dedicated taxes than the national average.

Exhibit 3.11
Kent County vs. National Sources of Funding for Parks and Recreation
2011



Finding 12: Six municipalities in Kent County have a parks and recreation millage (about 20% to total revenue). Four school districts have a dedicated millage.

Six of Kent County's 36 municipal governments levy some form of special millage related to parks and/or recreation. As seen Exhibit 3.12, these voter-approved taxes are dedicated to a variety of purposes. In addition to the municipal levies, four school districts in the county have a dedicated recreation millage.

Generally speaking, voters tend to support special millage requests if the purpose of the tax is clearly defined and there is a clear public benefit to be gained as a result of the increased revenue. The special millages cited below suggest strong support for trails, parkland and open space acquisition, and less support of general operations, maintenance and recreation services. The community recreation millages in the school districts reflect a willingness of some voters to invest tax dollars in improved recreational opportunities.

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Exhibit 3.12
Parks and Recreation Millages in Kent County
2011

Municipality	Millage Rate	Revenues	Purpose
Ada Township	0.3963	\$ 348,953	Open space and parks development
	0.2448	\$ 215,553	Parks maintenance & operations
	0.4977	\$ 438,238	Pathways/trailways
Cannon Township	0.3760	\$ 207,675	Trails
Cascade Township	0.2300	\$ 313,793	Parkland and open space purchase, development and maintenance
	0.3985	\$ 543,680	Pathways/trailways
East Grand Rapids City	0.2600	\$ 138,861	Debt
Kentwood City	0.0998	\$ 191,322	Trails and park development and acquisition. No operations or maintenance
Wyoming	1.5000	\$2,977,787	Parks, senior center, recreation programming, maintenance and operations. No general fund support for parks and recreation.
School District	Millage Rate	Revenues	Purpose
East Grand Rapids Public Schools	1.3455	\$ 765,741	Community Recreation
Forest Hills Public Schools	1.0000	\$2,936,560	Community Recreation
Northview Public Schools	0.7500	\$ 432,651	Community Recreation
Rockford Public Schools	0.9881	\$1,503,574	Public recreation and playgrounds

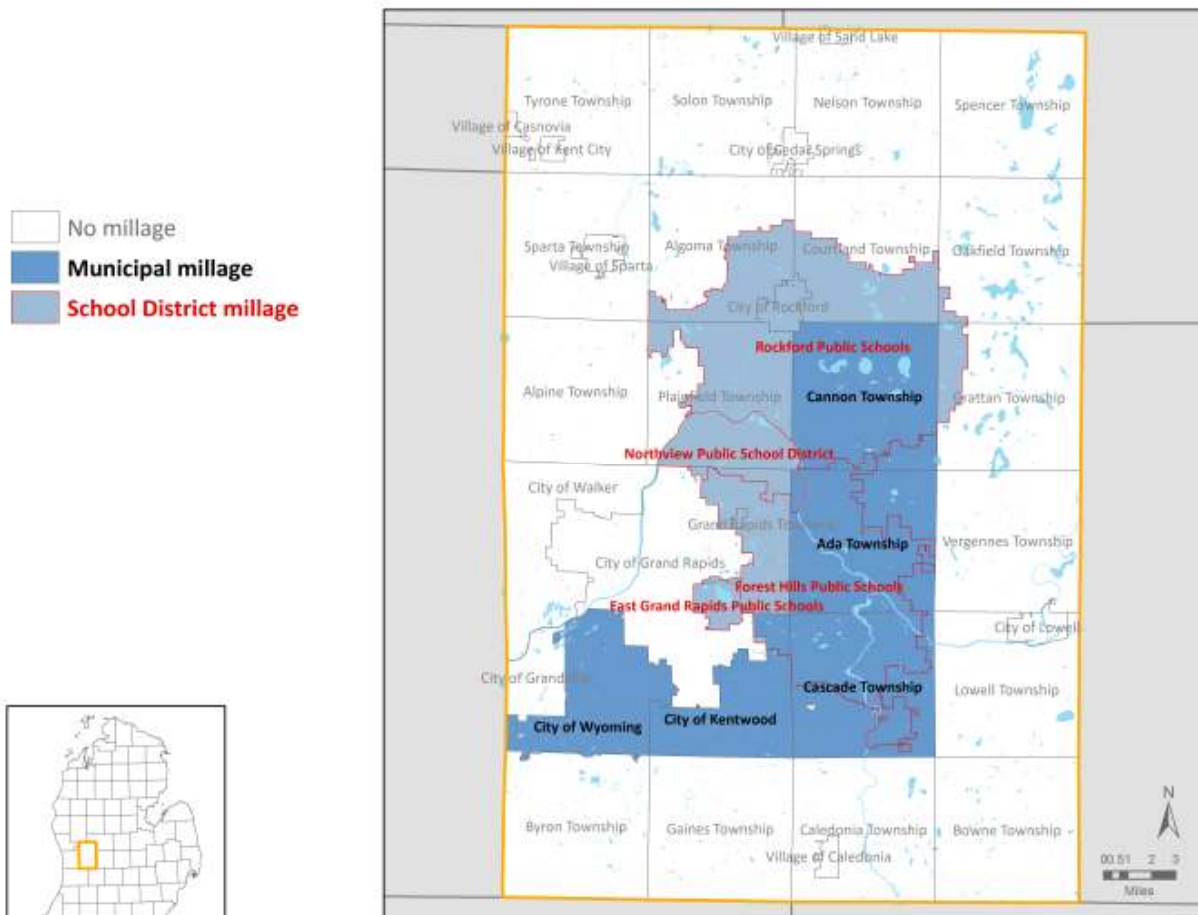
Source: Kent County Bureau of Equalization

Public Act 156 of 1917 authorizes school districts and municipalities to "operate a system of public recreation and playgrounds." The district's residents may "vote to provide funds for operating" the recreational facilities, and the district may "acquire, equip and maintain land, buildings and other recreational facilities" and "employ a superintendent of recreation and assistants." These recreational millages are subject to Headlee rollbacks.¹⁷

It is interesting to note that there is significant overlap of school-based recreation millages and parks and trails millages in a limited number of communities in the county. This can be seen in Exhibit 3.13.

¹⁷ Olson, Dr. Ryan S. and LaFaive, Michael D. Local Property Taxes by Type. The Mackinaw Center for Public Policy. May 30, 2007

Exhibit 3.13 Municipalities and School Districts with Dedicated Parks and Recreation Millages



Finding 13: Schools are a significant resource for recreation facilities.

School districts account for slightly over 50 percent of all recreation facilities in Kent County. The most prevalent types of facilities include athletics/sports amenities and playgrounds. The most frequent athletic facility amenities include tennis courts, basketball courts, football/lacrosse fields, soccer fields, volleyball courts, and baseball/softball fields. Additional amenities include indoor pools and tracks. The type and amount of use varies among the school districts. In addition, the types of agreements that exist with local parks and recreation agencies vary.

Nationally, school districts generally share their amenities with park and recreation agencies. This is no different in Kent County. The school inventory of facilities reduces the

KENT COUNTY MULTIJURISDICTIONAL PARKS STUDY

burden of amenities for park and recreation agencies to provide. However, the school facilities are generally unavailable during school hours. Furthermore, aside from playgrounds, the amenities owned by school districts are all athletically oriented.

Exhibit 3.14 provides a count of the school and municipal recreational facilities in Kent County.

Exhibit 3.14
Recreational Facilities in Schools and Municipal Parks in Kent County*

Facilities	Schools	Municipal	% Schools
Baseball	40	37	52%
Softball	39	28	58%
Ballfield	73	70	51%
Basketball	170	50	77%
Football	40	3	93%
Lacrosse	25	0	100%
Soccer	96	54	64%
Volleyball	54	18	75%
Tennis	146	104	58%
Open Field	16	13	55%
Track	17	1	94%
Playground	126	134	48%
Gymnasium	54	5	92%
Pool	9	6	60%
Skating	0	5	0%
Trails	1	66	1%

*Data is incomplete due to limited availability

Finding 14: Schools play a critical role in recreation programming in Kent County.

Fourteen of twenty-one schools responded to the survey distributed by the consulting team. Of those, 10 of the schools offer some level of community recreation programming (not school athletics). Similar to the school facility inventory, the program types are almost exclusively related to sports programs such as basketball, swimming, football, volleyball soccer, cheerleading, and tennis. One of the schools offers summer recreation programs. This listing of program inventory includes school district recreation programs but not interscholastic sports programs. In addition, it should be noted that school facilities are also used by other providers of recreation services, such as independent baseball and soccer groups. These uses are not accounted for in our data.

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There does not appear to be a relationship between number and types of offerings provided by a school district as compared to offerings by the local municipal parks and recreation agencies. The school programs focus primarily on sports activities and more often limit participation to residents of the district. It should be noted that some school districts restrict participation to in-district residents. This allows recreation agencies to determine unmet needs for sports programming and offer non-redundant programming. The number of schools offering various programs are listed in Exhibit 3.15.

Exhibit 3.15
School Recreational Programs in Kent County*

Programs	Schools
Basketball	10
Swimming	10
Summer camp	9
Volleyball	9
Football	8
Tennis	7
Baseball	6
Soccer	6
Cheerleading	5
Golf	4
Crew	3
Health/fitness	3
Rugby	3

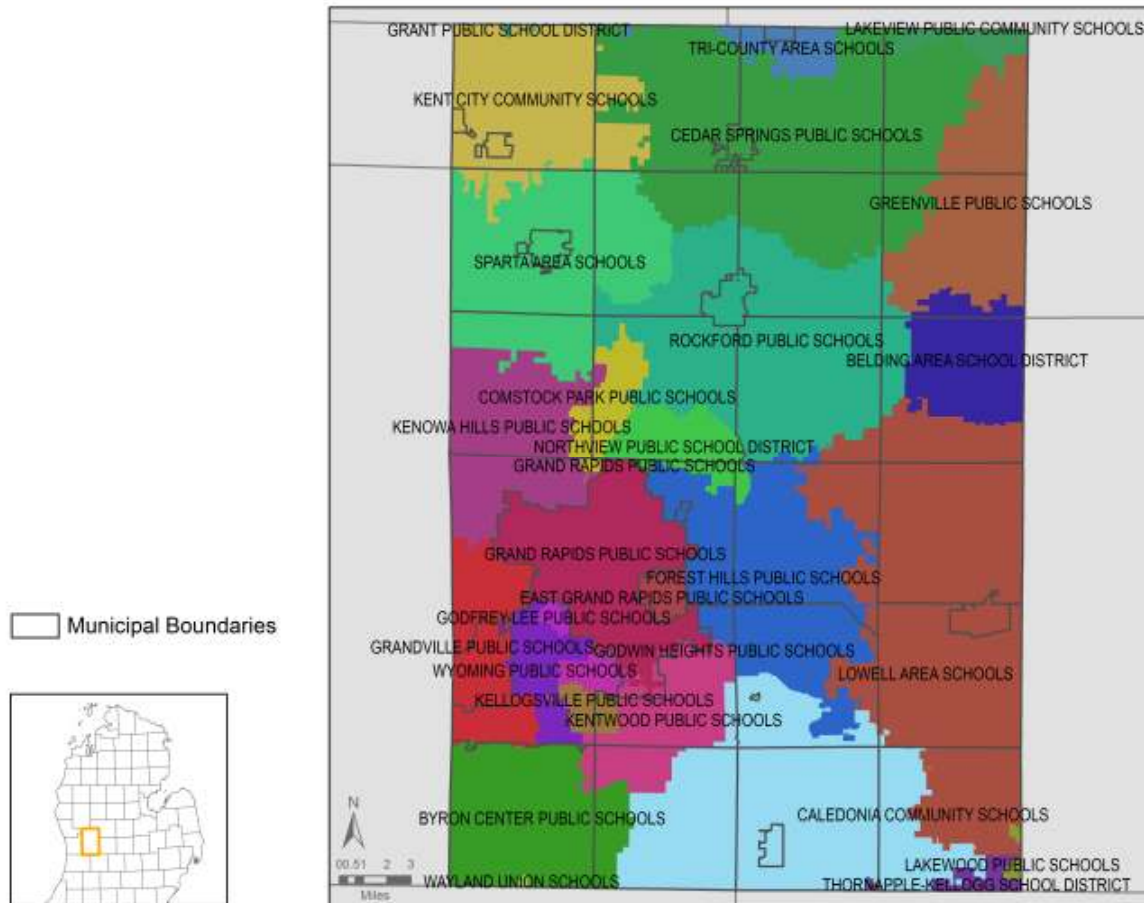
*Data is incomplete due to limited availability

Finding 15: School boundaries are not congruous with city/township boundaries, resulting in complexity in forming working relationships.

As mentioned previously, schools play a critical role in supplying recreation facilities, amenities, and programs. Relying on schools for community recreation needs is complicated by the different boundaries for schools and municipalities. For example, the City of Wyoming has seven school districts within its boundaries. As a result, developing and maintaining relationships and partnerships takes additional time and effort. Creating an overall system for park and recreation services within a community is challenging when many different agencies are involved.

Exhibit 3.16 displays school and municipal boundaries in Kent County.

Exhibit 3.16
School Districts in Kent County



Finding 16: Recreation programming (by parks and recreation agencies) is somewhat below national averages in Kent County.

Recreation program inventory is difficult to compare on a national basis. We asked agencies to list their recreation program inventory by major program types and compared this to the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) 2009 Operating Ratio Study. Program types included services for all age segments, from youth to senior citizens, and include activities such as fitness, team sports, aquatics, community events, and special recreation programs. It is important to note that one significant limitation to the percentage distribution is that program offerings do not take into account offerings by other (public agency) providers in the community, such as school districts. Therefore, it follows that a community with many other providers would have fewer offerings than a community with no other providers of similar services.

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Ten of the Kent County agencies offer recreation programs. The following exhibit shows the percentage of these agencies offering programs as compared to agencies nationally. The Kent County inventory is lower in all program types, most particularly in special recreation programs.

Exhibit 3.17
Percentage of Agencies Offering Programs

Program Area	National Average	Kent County
Community events	92%	80%
Team Sports	87%	80%
Seniors	84%	70%
Fitness	84%	40%
Aquatic	76%	40%
Special Recreation	62%	20%
Before and after school	57%	20%
Preschool	43%	30%

Finding 17: Kent County multi-jurisdictional relationships, particularly those involving schools, tend to be informal and not clearly defined.

As we have noted previously, schools play an important role in recreation programming in Kent County. (See Findings 13 – 15 for greater discussion of schools.) Schools hold a major portion of athletic facilities and play an integral role in community recreation programming. With the very notable exception of the Cedar Springs Area Parks and Recreation Commission, there is little in the way of formal relationships between schools and other local jurisdictions regarding parks and recreation. Twelve school jurisdictions responded to our question about contracts and formal agreements. Other than Cedar Springs, none reported having any inter-local agreement in place. The city of Grand Rapids does report having joint use of facilities, maintenance, and programming agreements, but many of these agreements are considered outdated.

East Grand Rapids, on the other hand, has a very complex agreement with the schools. This includes a joint agreement for their high school pool. In addition, they have a 50/50 arrangement for maintenance activities between the school district and parks and recreation. There is also a shared sports director position between parks and recreation and the middle school.

For some of the people we spoke with, formal agreements seemed to be unnecessary bureaucracy. Perhaps in some cases this is true and the relationships work well as they are presently constituted. However, in the absence of a clear agreement that defines roles, contributions, expectations and outcomes, we have no way of evaluating whether or not these relationships constitute a productive and appropriate use of public resources. Additionally, in interviews with a school and city which have shared some recreation functions for years, we

noted inconsistent interpretation of the informal agreement regarding how revenues and expenditures were to be shared.

Once again, we point to Cedar Springs as an effective model for inter-jurisdictional collaboration. Here the relationship between the schools and the participating jurisdictions is codified in an inter-local agreement as specified in Public Act 7 of 1967. The contribution of resources and the value delivered to the participating communities is well defined and easily measured.

Most other relationships between local jurisdiction and recreational programming providers tend to be relatively simple fee-for-service arrangements. Although the degree of formality in the relationship varies, they are mostly not inter-jurisdictional and consequently do not present the concerns mentioned above.

Finding 18: There is little independent park and recreation governance authority in Kent County.

Strong park systems tend to have strong, independent governance. A parks board or commission is empowered to make decisions, allocate resources and advocate on behalf of parks and recreation.

For example, The Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (Discussed in Chapter 5) is an elected body that oversees a \$72 million budget that comes primarily from a city parks levy. In addition to the city parks and recreations centers, the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board operates large parks, primarily within the city boundaries, that are considered regional assets. The Parks Board receives special State funding for these parks.

Here in Michigan, Washtenaw, Oakland and Macomb County are recognized as having strong county parks systems. In all three cases, there are strong county parks commissions that oversee their operation. Although these boards are appointed by their County Boards of Commissioners, they operate with considerable autonomy and manage very large budgets.

The Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority operates a five-county (Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Washtenaw and Livingston) parks system funded by a perpetual .25 mill property tax on residents in all five counties. Established in 1939 by State Act, the board has two members chosen by the governor and one from each participating county selected by the County Board of Commissioners.

When parks and recreation agencies are operated without a millage and as a functional department under a general legislative authority, such as a county board of commissioners or city council, they become one of many competing priorities. As a result, parks and recreation often do not get the attention they need and are an easy target for budget reductions.

Again, we point to Cedar Springs and Lowell Area authorities as examples of independent governing bodies who manage dedicated resources (although neither has a dedicated millage) to advance their defined priorities. Outside of these two groups, there are many advisory groups for parks and recreation in Kent County communities, but the formal governance rests with the city, township or county board. While an advisory committee may be considered a governance structure in the broadest sense, these groups lack the authority to make decisions and allocate resources.

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Exhibit 3.18 provides a list of all parks and recreation governance mechanisms (with or without formal authority) in Kent County.

Exhibit 3.18
Parks and Recreation Governance in Kent County
2011

Jurisdiction	Parks and Recreation Governance
City of Grand Rapids	Parks & Recreation Advisory Board
City of Kentwood	Parks & Recreation Commission
City of Lowell Lowell Township Vergennes Township	Lowell Area Recreation Authority
City of Wyoming	Parks and Recreation Commission (advisory)
Ada Township	Open Space Board Parks & Recreation Committee
Algoma Township Cedar Springs Courtland Township Nelson Township Solon Township	Cedar Springs Area Parks and Recreation Commission
Alpine Township	Parks & Recreation Advisory Committee
Byron Township	Parks & Recreation Committee
Cannon Township	Parks & Recreation Committee (makes recommendations to Township Board)
Cascade Township	Planning Committee responsible for Parks & Recreation
Grand Rapids Township	Parks & Recreation Committee
Grattan Township	Grattan Township Parks & Recreation Committee (Volunteer)

Finding 19: Partnerships with non-profit and private sector organizations in Kent County are being used to expand services and generate revenue in Kent County.

There are multiple examples of park and recreation agencies partnering with non-profit and private sector organizations to expand services and increase revenues. These relationships include the Kroc Center, YMCAs, Michigan Athletic Club, schools, arts commissions, and youth athletic organizations. Often, public-private relationships are initiated when a public park and recreation agency does not have the facilities or capacity to offer specific types of programs, and partners with a local non-profit or private agency to expand service offerings. The program guides of agencies provide information about recreation programs offered through partners. There are instances in which registration for programs at partner locations can be made through the parks and recreation agency.

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The 2009 NRPA Operating Ratio results indicate for municipalities with a population of 50,000 to 99,000 general indoor recreation space includes an average of 117,000 square footage of space, or a range of 1.18 to 2.34 sq. ft. per capita. According to the national average, this translates into a range of 710,000 to 1.4 million of indoor recreation space for all agencies in Kent County. With only a few agencies owning their own indoor recreation space such as Wyoming's Senior Center, Bryon Township's Community Center, Kentwood's Activity Center, and Walker Ice and Fitness Center, communities in Kent County have significantly less indoor space than other communities around the country.

In addition, the NRPA Operating Ratio study indicates that park and recreation agencies have one indoor pool per 42,000 population. According to this standard, there should be 14 indoor pools owned by Kent County park and recreation agencies. East Grand Rapids is the only park and recreation agency that owns and operates its own indoor pool.

These Operating Ratio numbers do not include information about school use or other partnership agreements. According to the school survey completed by the consulting team, most Kent County agencies have a relationship with school districts, but the level of use varies from community to community. (See finding 14)

Finding 20: There is no comprehensive assessment of public priorities for parks and recreation in Kent County.

Most parks and recreation agencies in Kent County have completed some sort of master plan. However, there is no multi-jurisdictional or regional planning process and there is no formal process in place to comprehensively assess public priorities for services. In the absence of this, programs and services are defined and implemented with little regard to what is available in surrounding communities. A statistically valid survey administered approximately every five years should be used to identify the needs, what needs are being met, and identification of gaps in services. Typically the questions on these surveys relate to:

- Extent of need for parks, amenities and programs
- Identification of what facilities, parks and programs are currently being used
- Where household members fulfill their recreation needs
- Extent of unmet needs
- Ideas for desired parks and recreation services that currently do not exist
- Identification of barriers to participation and visitation
- How households find out about services and how they prefer information to be distributed
- Satisfaction levels toward park maintenance, program quality, registration systems, Website, program guides, staff
- Funding priorities

According to Leisure Vision, a firm dedicated to providing needs assessment processes for park and recreation services, best practice agencies complete a statistically valid household

survey every five to seven years and analyze results to determine areas of strength and opportunities for improvement with results are typically posted on agency Websites.

These surveys are often supplemented with less formal (and more frequent) methods such as online surveys and program evaluations. Other public input methods include point of contact interviews, online forums, focus groups, and mystery shopping,

Finding 21: There is no mechanism for comprehensive county-wide multi-jurisdictional park and recreation planning in Kent County.

Best practice agencies have institutionalized planning processes. The Benchmark agencies referenced in Chapter 5 all have a commitment to a comprehensive and ongoing planning process. This is true for most, but not all of the Kent County agencies we reviewed. Some of the agencies with completed parks and recreation master plans include: Algoma Township: Recreation Plan, 2008, City of Grandville Recreation Plan, 2005, Vergennes Township: 2007 Recreation Plan, 2007 and Kentwood Park & Recreation Plan, 2010

Given the regional nature of parks and recreation, coordinated local planning, if not comprehensive regional planning, makes sense and should drive multi-jurisdictional programming and park development. As we have noted consistently in this report, Kent County agencies have widely varying levels of programming, park amenities and inter-jurisdictional cooperation. The absence of countywide comprehensive planning is clearly a factor.

A comprehensive planning approach is implemented to gain a system wide perspective of park and recreation development. It establishes spending priorities and is the basis for capital and operational budgets. Elements of planning can include the development of trails and connectivity, park development, recreation program inventory, natural resource management, land acquisition, sustainability approaches, facility development, and the use of technology. In addition, benefits can be derived from an ongoing study of demographic changes to ensure services adapt and correspond to these changes.

Master plan processes usually also include a determination of appropriate level of service standards for parkland and amenities. National Parks and Recreation Association's Park and Recreation Operating Ratio and Geographic Information System (PRORAGIS) database could be used to assist in determining deficiencies in the countywide system. Additional possibilities include identifying where users are coming from to help with more customized marketing.

Finding 22: There is very little coordination of marketing and promotion of park and recreation programming.

There is an opportunity for agencies to gain awareness and increased business by coordinating marketing and promotional efforts. Kent county parks and recreation agencies perform marketing efforts on an individual community basis. We found no evidence of agencies working together to do cross promotion of programs among neighboring agencies. The only coordination appears to be around special event planning to avoid multiple special events on the same date. Agencies partnering with the YMCA and Kroc Center have references to their programs in their park and recreation agency brochures. Yet, programs from neighboring

agencies are not mentioned. There may be opportunities to augment offerings by including information of other agencies within marketing materials.

There is wide variation in the level of commitment and support for promotional efforts of park and recreation services. Services are difficult to find on some Websites as they are not prominently featured on the home page of sites. Few agencies use social media, while many do not.

Finding 23: There is limited use of technology to support operations and public access.

Benchmark parks and recreation agencies are on the forefront of using technology to communicate with their users, market their programs and serve the needs of the community. We found little in the way of advanced technology in Kent County parks and recreation agencies.

In Kent County, the presence of park and recreation department Websites, as part of the municipal site, varies from one community to another. Park and recreation services are difficult to find on some Websites. Others have prominence on the home page navigational tool bar, such as East Grand Rapids. The East Grand Rapids, Kentwood, and Wyoming sites list recreation and events on the city's home page, which makes it very easy for potential customers to find information about services.

Few Kent County agencies have online registration or reservation capabilities. These agencies include East Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids, Kent County, Kentwood, and Wyoming. Kent County currently uses a variety of software applications but is exploring a more unified application for its parks operations. East Grand Rapids, Kentwood, and Wyoming use RecTrac. Walker uses Max Ice for their ice rink scheduling purposes. Automated registration systems have become an industry standard. According to the National Parks and Recreation Association's Park and Recreation Operating Ratio and Geographic Information System (PRORAGIS). In 2011, 77 percent of all reporting park and recreation agencies had automated registration systems for program registrations.

Nine of the school districts surveyed as part of this study use automated program and registration software. The software systems include: EClassTrack, Active, Schedule Star, School Dude, Ace Ware, RecPro, and DynaCal. Therefore, there are many different software systems being used, and none of the school systems use RecTrac (Vermont Systems).

In addition to the agencies offering online registration, there are some agencies that have their program guides listed on their Website, but without online registration capability. These agencies include Cedar Springs, Kentwood, and Ada Township. All of the agencies have their program guides in a PDF format on their Website. This prevents potential customers from accessing registration from their smart phones. The exception is Wyoming which has online registration and smart phone access.

Aside from Kent County, no agency offers an online reservation system for picnic pavilion, parks, ball field, or facility rental reservation processes. Most agencies require the customer to handle this transaction in person or by telephone.

No Kent County park and recreation agency participates in the NRPA PRORAGIS system. Wyoming does participate in the Annual Michigan Local Government Benchmarking

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Consortium and this effort includes Parks and Recreation measures. Automated systems can provide agencies with data for decision making and can be used for a performance dashboard. These dashboards support an internal focus on performance as well as external transparency for organizational performance. The following is a dashboard from the Northbrook, IL Park District that measures critical areas of organizational performance. None of the Kent County agencies have this information listed on their Websites.

Exhibit 3.19
Northbrook, IL Park District Dashboard



Finding 24: Kent County Parks and Recreation have very little capital equipment dedicated solely to parks and Recreation.

Through our survey of parks and recreation departments in the county, we found that most agencies have eliminated their inventory of highly specialized, costly equipment, in favor of multi-use equipment and contracted services. A number of departments that once employed a crew of arborists and provided lift trucks and larger chippers, for example, have sold the

equipment and now contract for tree trimming services on an as-needed basis. Agencies found that this approach results in lower capital and operating costs, particularly when considering liability associated with this type of equipment and labor.

Larger equipment, such as backhoes, dump trucks, plow trucks and the like are being shared with other departments in most agencies. Very few municipalities purchase large equipment for single department use, particularly if the single department is parks. We found little opportunity for municipalities to share specialized or heavy equipment as a means of reducing inventory costs.

Smaller equipment dedicated to parks and recreation (mowers, trimmers, trucks, trailers, etc.) is necessarily duplicated between agencies. Most agencies require this equipment at the same time (e.g., mowing when the weather is dry or clearing pathways and parking lots when it snows).

Finding 25: No significant redundancies or excess capacity exists in Kent County parks and recreation agencies.

Due in part to reduced staffing and budgets and in large part to the small size of parks and recreation agencies in the county, there does not appear to be any significant inefficiency. When looking for efficiencies the first step is to look at the potential to combine functions and reduce the total (combined) staffing necessary to perform the function through some economy of scale. For example, combining two or more 911 dispatch centers nearly always allows the combined function to reduce the total number of dispatchers necessary to maintain or improve service levels. We found no such opportunities in parks and recreation where staffs are small. In the absence of new technology, combining staff does not produce any economies of scale in parks maintenance and recreation programming.

The next obvious place to look is capital equipment. Getting precise data on capital equipment proved difficult. This was due in large part to the fact that the equipment is often provided through a department of public works or similar function. Parks and recreation agencies simply do not have much dedicated equipment. We looked at other agencies, outside of Kent County, and found that equipment sharing has not proven to be highly beneficial. Similar agencies need the equipment on the same schedules (e.g. mowing grass or plowing snow) and there is considerable lost time if the equipment must be moved around any significant distance.

Finally, we looked for redundant programming. Here again we found little that would suggest an opportunity for enhanced efficiency. While it is true that multiple jurisdictions offer similar programs, these programs appear to meet the need of the community in which they are offered.

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Exhibit 3.20 Opportunities for Improved Efficiency in Kent County Parks and Recreation

Efficiency Source	Current Situation in Kent county
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staffing was difficult to measure as much is integrated elsewhere in responding jurisdictions• Staffing already cut
Capital equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not a significant amount of specialized equipment• Outsourcing occurring• Limited opportunities<ul style="list-style-type: none">➢ Geographic limit (not efficient to move significant distance)➢ Sharing limit (agencies need the equipment at the same time)
Redundancies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No significant redundancies identified

Finding 26: Access to recreational programming varies significantly throughout Kent County.

There are 10 agencies in Kent County that offer recreation programming. This includes the cities of Walker, Kentwood, East Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids, Wyoming and Cedar Springs, and the two townships: Byron and Ada. In addition, the four townships of Courtland, Algoma, Nelson, and Solon offer programming through the Cedar Springs Area Parks and Recreation Commission. In reviewing the program inventory of the agencies offering programs, there is wide variation in the depth and breadth of types of programs offered. For example, Wyoming, Grand Rapids, East Grand Rapids and Kentwood offer programs in virtually every core program area. On the other hand, Ada and Grand Rapids Townships offer noticeably fewer programs.

Pricing and marketing of services vary from community to community. Opportunities exist for reciprocity among neighboring agencies to provide greater access to programming and potentially greater revenue for the agencies.

Twelve townships do not offer recreational programs, nor do they partner with other municipalities. In addition, six municipalities do not offer their residents any recreation programs.

Finding 27: There is limited programming for special needs individuals in Kent County.

Currently, only Wyoming and Kentwood offer programs for special needs populations. Accessibility of parks and amenities varies throughout the county.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires park and recreation agencies to provide reasonable accommodations in programs and services. This can be accomplished through inclusion support, adaptive equipment, accessible transportation, or stand-alone

programs like a special recreation association (a collaboration of agencies) or departmental special recreation services. The Justice Department and lower courts still do not have a clear picture of what is a "reasonable" accommodation and this definition continues to evolve.

Compliance is federally mandated. On March 15, 2012, the 2010 Standards for Accessible Design become effective for new design and construction. Units of local government can no longer opt to use the 1991 Standards. Audits of sites new to the design standards, such as playgrounds, sports fields, sports courts, golf courses, swimming facilities, fitness centers, shooting ranges, places of amusement, fishing areas, boating areas, and more, must be conducted to assure compliance with the new standard.

Finding 28: Advocacy groups, where they exist in Kent County, tend to be narrowly focused with limited collaboration.

The June, 2010 report of the Kent County Board of Commissioners Parks Subcommittee lists 45 non-governmental groups, and 23 companies and foundations with an interest in supporting some aspect of parks and recreation.¹⁸ The non-governmental groups range from youth sports, adult leagues and fitness groups to land conservancy, trail committees and habitat restoration groups. Friends of Grand Rapids Parks have proven to be a strong voice for the preservation, maintenance and redevelopment of parks within the City of Grand Rapids.

The sheer number and breadth of interests of these groups clearly indicates the degree to which residents value their park and recreation assets. That said, we note the absence of any organized groups advocating broadly for parks and recreation within the county or region. This leaves the existing groups working separately for their specific interests and sometimes in competition with each other.

¹⁸ Kent County Board of Commissioners, Parks Subcommittee. Kent County Parks Collaborations and Partnerships. June, 2010. Pgs. 5-7.

Chapter 4: Parks and Recreation Collaboration in Michigan

Many in Michigan believe that our State constitution's mandate for local control (home rule) creates structural inefficiencies in the delivery of public services. Michigan has more than 2700 governmental entities. This includes counties, cities, townships and villages. It also includes K-12 school districts, intermediate school districts, community colleges and various authorities. Often there is substantial duplication of services and facilities.

At the same time, the Michigan Constitution provides for inter-governmental collaboration.¹⁹ Fostering collaboration across boundaries offers opportunities for improving efficiency and producing significant benefit for the public. With the budget challenges of the last decade, the emphasis on inter-jurisdictional collaboration has intensified. Under Governor Snyder, the legislature has created financial incentives for this by eliminating traditional State revenue sharing and replacing it with programs that require local government to meet certain requirements including demonstrated collaboration.

Intergovernmental collaboration has proven easier said than done. Three factors stand in the way of shared services in the public sector:

1. Sunk costs: Many local units of government have made significant investments in people and systems and are reluctant to make a new investment in a seemingly more complicated, and perhaps unproven, approach to service delivery.
2. Lack of political will and focus: Local elected officials are rightly focused on the needs of their jurisdictions, but sometimes take a narrow view and do not look beyond their own boundaries for solutions. Perhaps they see more risk than promise in these cooperative approaches. As a result, developing joint funding agreements has proven to be a major challenge.
3. Collective bargaining constraints: Michigan law gives substantial power to public sector employee unions and makes it very difficult for local units of government to change who does what. Public sector employees are organized into small bargaining units under different and sometimes competing unions. These factors often force leaders to look to outsourcing to the private sector rather than to make substantial improvements in the existing processes.

There is general agreement that the problem is caused, in part, by home rule and the number of units of local government. Ironically, the solution for creating intergovernmental cooperation has been to create new units of government in the form of multi-jurisdictional commissions and authorities. There are more than a dozen Michigan laws that establish multi-jurisdictional entities. These laws create governance structures that support specific public priorities across units of local government.

Without these mechanisms, intergovernmental cooperation is limited to fee-for-service arrangements where one unit acts as a vendor to another unit. While these contractual arrangements can produce some efficiencies, they have limited application. Anytime there is

¹⁹ Michigan Constitution of 1963, Article 7, § 28

shared decision making, especially when it is related to funding, the entities must formalize the relationship under the appropriate legislation.

Enabling legislation

The Urban Cooperation Act of 1967 permits a political subdivision to exercise jointly with any other political subdivision any power, privilege or authority which such political subdivisions share in common and which each might exercise separately.²⁰

The Urban Cooperation Act allows two or more units of government to establish “Interlocal Agreements” (ILAs). Under these agreements, local governmental entities can join forces on services such as public safety, transportation and water usage, without having to jump through big bureaucratic hoops or bog down the Legislature for approval.²¹ As we noted in Finding 7, Cedar Springs Area Parks and Recreation Commission and the Lowell Area Recreation Authority were both formed under this act.

The Urban Cooperation Act enables the joint exercise of power. Participating jurisdictions may provide for a separate legal or administrative entity to administer or execute the agreement which may be a commission, board, or council constituted pursuant to the agreement.²² Under this act, the participating entities may share tax revenue for the stated purpose, but the joint authority cannot levy a millage of its own.

The broad purposes allowed under PA 7 make it an attractive mechanism for intergovernmental cooperation. Two or more jurisdictions may come together to serve a common purpose (so long as all participating entities are authorized to provide this service individually).

PA 8 authorizes two or more political subdivisions “to enter into a contract with each other providing for the transfer of functions or responsibilities to one another or any combination thereof upon the consent of each political subdivision involved.”²³ This law essentially regulates outsourcing of municipal services by one jurisdiction to another. Potentially, one jurisdiction could contract with another for parks and recreation services, although no examples of this have been identified.

Both laws have seen somewhat limited use due in large part to language that requires participating jurisdictions to retain all current employee at the highest rate of pay and benefits. In 2011, the legislature amended these laws in PA 262 and 263 to allow municipalities to achieve greater operating efficiencies through these mechanisms by addressing language

²⁰ An interlocal agreement between participating political subdivisions creating the Southeast Michigan regional energy office. Citizens Research Council of Michigan, April, 2007.

²¹ Hoekstra, Kathy. “Interlocal Agreements – Good Intent, Bad Practice.” Mackinac Center for Public Policy, April 11, 2011.

²² Authorization for Interlocal Agreements and Intergovernmental Cooperation in Michigan. Citizens Research Council of Michigan, April, 2007.

²³ McGee, Michael P. and Trebilcock, Christopher M. Intergovernmental Cooperation in Michigan: A Policy Dialogue, White Paper B, Legal Barriers To Intergovernmental Cooperation Agreements In Michigan. Miller, Canfield, Paddock and Stone, P.L.C., Michigan State University Extension, Land Policy Institute (No date).

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related to the pay and benefit requirements, and clarifying collective bargaining rights as set forth in the original acts. In addition, the Governor also signed into law PA 258 to provide for certain municipal joint endeavors; to provide standards for those municipal joint endeavors; to provide powers and duties of a municipal joint endeavor; to authorize the levy of a property tax by a municipal joint endeavor; and to provide for the powers and duties of certain government officials.

Older legislation (PA 312 of 1929 and Pa 292 of 1989) allow for the creation of Charter Commissions or Metropolitan Area Councils. Both of which may be used for supporting parks and recreation. For example, the Southern Lakes Regional Metropolitan Parks and Recreation district was created under PA 312 in 2000. This is a joint commission established by the Townships of Tyrone, Fenton and Argentine and the cities of Linden and Fenton.²⁴

Exhibit 4.1 provides a summary of the general purpose laws for municipal cooperation in Michigan.

Exhibit 4.1 **General Purpose Michigan Intergovernmental Cooperation Enabling Legislation**

Act	Title	Establishes:
PA 7 of 1967	Urban Cooperation Act	Inter-local agreements / joint exercise of power (Authority)
PA 8 of 1967	Intergovernmental Transfers of Functions and Responsibilities Act	Joint board or commission
PA 258 of 2011	Municipal Partnership Act	Joint endeavor or Authority
PA 262 of 2011		Amends UCA
PA 263 of 2011		Amends ITFRA
PA 312 of 1929	Metropolitan District Act	Charter Commission
PA 292 of 1989	Metropolitan Councils Act	Metropolitan Area Council

Exhibit 4.2 summarizes legislation that is specific to parks and recreation. Although all have some degree of relevance, we focus on PA 156, PA 261 and PA 321 as having particular relevance to this project.

²⁴ Burkholder, Gary. Partnering for Parks: Intergovernmental Options for Providing Parks and Recreation. Michigan Recreation and Parks Association, 2011.

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Exhibit 4.2

Parks and Recreation Specific Michigan Intergovernmental Cooperation Enabling Legislation

Act	Title	Establishes:
PA 157 of 1905	Township Parks and Places of Recreation	Township Park Commission or Board of Commissioners
PA 90 of 1913	Parks, Zoological Gardens and Airports	County Park Trustees
PA 156 of 1917	Recreation and Playgrounds	Recreation Board
PA 261 of 1965	County and Regional Parks	Parks and Recreation Commission
PA 451 of 1994 Part 721	Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act	Michigan Trailway Management Council
PA 321 of 2000	Recreational Authorities Act	Board of Directors

Recreation and Playgrounds Act

PA 156 of 1917 allows any city, village, county or township (or combination thereof) to operate a system of public recreation and playgrounds; acquire equipment and maintain land, buildings or other recreational facilities; employ a superintendent of recreation and assistants; vote and expend funds for the operation of such system. In addition, in the absence of a local parks and recreation commission, the law allows any school district to operate a system of public recreation and playgrounds, vote a tax to provide funds for operating same, and to exercise all other powers enumerated above.²⁵

The Greater Romeo-Washington-Bruce Parks and Recreation Commission was created in 1983 under this act. The Commission is made up of representatives from Washington Charter and Bruce Townships, the Village of Romeo and Romeo Community Schools. They have a .75 mills operating millage that supports parks, athletic fields, recreation centers and leisure activities.²⁶

²⁵ PA 156 of 1917 (MCL 123.51 - 123.54)

²⁶ Burkholder, Gary. Partnering for Parks: Intergovernmental Options for Providing Parks and Recreation. Michigan Recreation and Parks Association, 2011.

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County Parks and Recreation Commissions

Model county parks and recreation agencies in Michigan have both a dedicated millage and independent governance. These agencies are formed under PA 261 of 1965. The law specifies the structure of the board stating that “The Commission shall consist of 10 members including a member of the County Road Commission, the County Water Resources Commissioner, a member of the County Planning Advisory Board and seven members appointed by the County Board of Commissioners, at least one and not more than three of whom shall be members of the Board.”²⁷ In lieu of a formal commission in Kent County, the County Board of Commissioners acts as the parks board and there is no dedicated millage for parks development or operation.

Exhibit 4.3 provides millage amounts for four county parks commissions.

Exhibit 4.3
Michigan County Parks and Recreation Commissions

Jurisdiction	Tax Source	Tax Revenue	Percent of Total Budget	Millage Rate
Washtenaw County	Parks operating	\$3,600,000	34%	0.2500
	Park development and land acquisition	\$3,600,000	34%	0.2500
	Natural area preservations	\$3,600,000	n/a	0.2500
Oakland County	Parks operating	\$11,078,000	44%	0.2500
Ottawa County	Parks operating	\$2,974,049	80%	0.3165
St. Clair County	Purchase, develop and maintain parks and trails, and local P&R revenue sharing	\$2,600,000	100%	0.4956

St. Clair County is the only county in the state of Michigan that systematically distributes parks and recreation millage funds to its local units of government. Since 2005, \$4,469,857.00 has been distributed to the 33 local units of government in St. Clair County. This gives cities and townships the opportunity to develop parks and recreation facilities and programs in their own communities.²⁸

Views differ on the St. Clair County model. Some have suggested that the monies distributed back to local jurisdictions is not enough to make a difference in most communities. Others say that amounts in the range of \$10,000 have a significant impact on programming in small townships are critical to these jurisdictions.

²⁷ PA 261 of 1965 (MCL 46.351)

²⁸ <http://www.stclaircounty.org/offices/parks/forms/Millagefactsheet.pdf>

Recreational Authorities Act

PA 321 of 2000 allows for the establishment of recreational authorities; to provide powers and duties of an authority; to authorize the assessment of a fee, the levy of a property tax, and the issuance of bonds and notes by an authority; and to provide for the powers and duties of certain government officials. The allowable purposes of these authorities are the acquisition, construction, operation, maintenance, or improvement of one or more of the following:

- (i) A public swimming pool.
- (ii) A public recreation center.
- (iii) A public auditorium.
- (iv) A public conference center.
- (v) A public park.
- (vi) A public museum.
- (vii) A public historic farm.²⁹

An authority is created by the affirmative vote of the legislative body of each participating jurisdiction adopting the articles of incorporation and proper filing of these articles with the Secretary of State. The board of the authority may be elected or appointed as defined in the articles.³⁰

Under PA 321, an authority may levy a tax of not more than one mill for a period of not more than 20 years on all of the taxable property within the territory of the authority for the purposes of acquiring, constructing, operating, maintaining, and improving a public swimming pool, public recreation center, public auditorium or conference center, or public park. The authority may levy the tax only upon the approval of a majority of the electors in *each* (all) of the participating municipalities of the authority. The proposal for a tax is submitted to a vote of the electors of the authority by resolution of the authority board.³¹

Since 2000, thirteen recreational authorities have been created. Three of these have successfully passed millages. The purposes of the thirteen vary widely and include future parks and recreation facilities, trail development, community centers, skate parks, soccer fields and many others.³²

One of these efforts that has received substantial attention is the Newaygo Community Recreational Authority. This authority was formed in 2006. Its members include the City of Newaygo, Brooks, Garfield, and Croton townships. Everett Township was part of the original group of jurisdictions that began the process but later decided to opt out. In 2011, Croton Township opted in to the authority.

The Newaygo Authority has been successful in getting grant funding. They completed a joint Recreation and Natural Resources Conservation Plan (making them eligible for DNR grant funding) in 2007 for parks improvements. It has also received substantial support from the

²⁹ PA 321 of 2000 (MCL 123.1131 - 123.1157)

³⁰ PA 321 of 2000 (123.1135)

³¹ PA 321 of 2000 (123.1141)

³² Burkholder, Gary. Partnering for Parks: Intergovernmental Options for Providing Parks and Recreation. Michigan Recreation and Parks Association, 2011.

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Freemont Area Community Foundation including \$309,000 for facility improvements. The Newaygo Public Schools contribute \$2,000 a year although they have no formal affiliation. The Newaygo Authority has no millage or debt.

The authority has a fairly narrow purpose. It was formed to focus on trail development, a soccer complex and a skate park. Today projects and properties under authority control include a community building (rental for banquets, weddings, etc. which is near their Welcome Center, a skate park (maintained by Newaygo DPW), two baseball diamonds in the City of Newaygo (maintained by Little League). They have upgraded several soccer fields (maintained by AAYSO) and provide equipment for these fields. They have also built stairs along a trail. (The trail is maintained by volunteers.) They have also spearheaded the development of non-motorized trails linking the Winter Sports Complex with the North Country Trail and Downtown Newaygo.

The Authority's board is comprised of two appointed representatives from each of the participating jurisdictions. An additional member (Newaygo County Parks Director) is appointed by the Newaygo County Parks Commission, which is not a member jurisdiction.

The Newaygo Community Recreation Authority offers a strong model for success. The organization operates without a millage. It has been successful in winning State grants and substantial private support. It has strengthened community parks and recreation assets as an overlay authority. This allows participating communities to continue to pursue their individual parks and recreation priorities while at the same time receiving the benefit of additional support for regional assets.

Les Salacina, the Brooks Township Supervisor, states that "the Authority is one of the most positive things we have done for this community. The Authority has allowed us to focus on providing for facilities that affect the entire region while maintaining our own autonomy for township initiatives."³³

Mixed record of success

Not all attempts at parks and recreation collaboration in Michigan have met with success. The City of Jackson folded its Parks and Recreation into the Jackson County Parks Department in July 2010. This followed the two agencies completing a joint five year master plan in 2009. Through an inter-local agreement, the two agencies formed a joint parks and recreation system known as the Metro Parks System. In addition an oversight committee was formed to guide the joint effort.

In February, 2012 Jackson City Council voted unanimously to end the agreement. Jackson City Manager, Larry Shaffer said the city provides numerous parks and recreation programs and the county is primarily involved in the management of its parks properties. He added that the county is not as financially committed to parks and recreation programs the city is.³⁴ The City's Parks and Recreation Commission and Ella Sharp Park Board of Trustees also

³³ Burkholder, Gary. Partnering for Parks: Intergovernmental Options for Providing Parks and Recreation. Michigan Recreation and Parks Association, 2011. Page 11.

³⁴ "Jackson County Board Chairman Steve Shotwell says calls for end of city, county parks merger "slap in the face to community." Jackson Citizen Patriot. January 18, 2012.

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voted unanimously to recommend ending an intergovernmental agreement between the city and the county.³⁵

Insiders say there was a different value system in the two organizations. The two agencies had differing funding levels and very different operations. The county system was focused on a nine-month parks maintenance operation while the city parks department had year-round recreation programs as well as the city forestry program. Other than the joint planning effort in 2009, the two agencies had no prior experience with collaboration. The city parks director described the situation as “jumping in the deep end.”

The joint effort seems to have been driven by financial problems the city was facing in 2009 and 2010. But trying to fold the larger city parks and recreation function into the much smaller county parks department proved to be a poor solution. The city had a general fund budget of \$1.3 million for parks and recreation, compared to \$600,000 for the county. The city budgeted \$400,000 in capital improvements for parks and recreation, and the county had one-tenth of that amount budgeted (\$40,000).³⁶

It has also been suggested that the joint effort did not produce the expected efficiencies and may have ended up costing more as the county worked to implement county-wide recreation programs. The joint effort did combine administrative staffs and there was the joint purchasing of an aerator for the golf courses.

Conclusion

Parks and recreation, perhaps more than any municipal service help define the character of a community. The levels of funding, amenities and programming vary widely from one community to the next. This is certainly true in Kent County (see Finding 2). As such, there have been very few attempts to combine parks and recreation jurisdictions in Michigan (or nationally for that matter). Although only one example, the Jackson/Jackson County experience is a cautionary tale for anyone seeking to consolidate parks and recreation agencies. Whether driven by efficiency goals or pursuit of a grander vision for parks and recreation, consolidation can be a difficult and expensive option.

As such, we believe that an overlay authority is a much better option for communities to come together to achieve clearly defined common priorities without elimination of existing local functions that are established to meet the specific needs and priorities of an individual community.

The record of success of the thirteen PA 321 Recreation Authorities is worth noting. These organizations can bring together new funding resources to achieve broader multi-jurisdictional goals and be a platform upon which communities can develop cooperative efforts.

http://www.mlive.com/news/jackson/index.ssf/2012/01/jackson_county_board_chairman_1/4602/comments-newest.html

³⁵ “Jackson parks boards endorse ending cooperation agreement with Jackson County.” Jackson Citizen Patriot. February 02, 2012.

http://www.mlive.com/news/jackson/index.ssf/2012/02/jackson_parks_boards_endorse_e.html

³⁶ Jackson-Jackson County parks agreement doesn’t benefit city, manager says as council ends deal.” Jackson Citizen Patriot. February 7, 2012.

http://www.mlive.com/news/jackson/index.ssf/2012/02/post_261.html

Chapter 5: National Park and Recreation Agency Models

There are many examples of extraordinary park and recreation systems in the United States. The Trust for Public Land identified seven factors that distinguish excellent parks systems. These are:

1. A clear expression of purpose
2. An ongoing planning and community involvement process
3. Sufficient assets in land, staffing, and equipment to meet the system's goals
4. Equitable access
5. User satisfaction
6. Safety from crime and physical hazards
7. Benefits for the community beyond the boundaries of the parks³⁷

We looked at many agencies and summarize our findings of four highly successful agencies. These model agencies discussed here were chosen because they meet the criteria of The Trust for Public Land and they are agencies with which we have substantial familiarity, either through our consulting work or professional experience. We also sought to have a range of organizations in terms of budget and population served.

The four presented are consistently viewed as *best practice* agencies. Bend Oregon was awarded a Gold Medal in 2006 by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) for parks and recreation management. The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) has also been honored with the NRPA Gold Medal. In addition, the MPRB has a four-star rating (highest point value awarded) from the Trust for Public Land, indicating the Minneapolis Park System is one of the best in the nation. Exhibit 5.1 provides a summary table of the four agencies. Each is discussed in detail following the exhibit.

The Mission, vision and core value statements of these top performing agencies are provided in Appendix A of this report.

³⁷ Harnick, Peter. The Excellent City Park System. The Trust for Public Land, 2003.

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Exhibit 5.1
Comparison of Model Parks and Recreation Agencies
2011

	Minneapolis, MN	Kettering, OH	Bend, OR	Charleston County, SC
Type of agency	Special District	City Department	Special District	Special District
Population served	382,578	58,000	76,369	350,000
Budget	\$72 million	\$12.5 million	\$13.6 million	\$24.4 million
Operating expenses per capita	\$200	\$216	\$177	\$70
Dedicated millage	Yes	Yes (bond levy)	Yes	Yes
Percent of revenue from non-tax sources	30%	38%	40%	55%
Park acreage	6,400	450	2,291	9,526
Park acreage per 1,000 population	16.8	7.8	30.0	27.0
Governance	Nine member elected commission	City Council	Five member elected board	Seven commissioners appointed by the governor
Number of full-time staff	500	32	80	179
Population served per full-time staff	765	1,813	958	1,955

While our benchmark agencies were chosen for their reputation and meeting the requirement for an excellent system, we note that they have a number of common characteristics that we believe drive excellence.

First we note that all four agencies have a dedicated tax funding source (independent of a sponsoring jurisdiction's general fund) **and** have been aggressive about non-tax revenue. In fact, the Executive Director of the Charleston County, SC Parks Commission writes that "The financial foundation of our park system is grounded in the enterprise approach."³⁸ As such, their non-tax revenue is 55 percent of their operating budget. Well above the other organizations we have presented here and high above the national average of about 30 percent.

We also note that three of the four systems presented here operate as special districts and have independent governance. As we note throughout this report, dedicated funding and

³⁸ 2012-2013 Budget letter.

independent governance are key drivers of system excellence. As we will discuss later, these agencies have more stable funding and strong public advocates for parks and recreation.

It is estimated that there are over 400 park and recreation agencies in the US with independent governance boards.³⁹ Fifty of these are multi-jurisdictional. Most were created during the *Metropolitan* era. During this period, roughly the 1950s through the 1970s) there was a national trend to create large regional (or metropolitan) agencies of many types to accomplish things that local government could not do alone. Here in Michigan, the Huron Clinton Metropolitan Authority was an early version of this approach (established by State Act in 1939).

Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, Minneapolis MN

There are few agencies in the country that have such a rich history and operate such an extraordinary system as the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB). The agency was created in 1883 by an act of the Minnesota Legislature. The history is a fascinating study of the importance of independent funding and governance.

It all began in the winter of 1883 when a small, but influential group of determined Minneapolis citizens met to consider how to promote the interests of the rapidly growing city. They decided the city needed parks—an objective long sought, but never achieved. Bypassing a city council that had never liked the idea—and throughout history has often opposed the park board—they went straight to the state legislature for the authority to create an independent Board of Park Commissioners for the city. Minneapolis voters approved the Park Act on April 3, 1883, establishing what would become an important contributor to the quality of life in all parts of the city.⁴⁰

The nine-member Board of Commissioners is an independently elected, semi-autonomous body responsible for maintaining and developing the Minneapolis Park system to meet the needs of citizens of Minneapolis. They oversee a budget in excess of \$72 million.

A superintendent oversees more than 500 full-time employees and another 600 plus seasonal employees. They provide administration, planning, programs, development, maintenance and police protection for the city's park and recreational facilities. Environmental, recreational and other park programs and services are provided for all ages and abilities, from toddlers to senior citizens.

The Minneapolis Park System consists of 182 park properties, including local and regional parks, historic sites, playgrounds, golf courses, gardens, picnic areas, biking and walking paths, nature sanctuaries and the 55-mile Grand Rounds National Scenic Byway. Together, these properties total nearly 6,732 acres of land and water. The backbone of the park system is its 51 full-service neighborhood recreation centers.

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board annually serves nearly 400,000 citizens of Minneapolis. Approximately 18 million visits are made to the system each year, with an estimated five million visits to neighborhood parks. The Chain of Lakes draws over five million visits annually. The lakes offer swimming, boating, concerts and other amenities all within the urban core of the city.

³⁹ Gilbert, Paul. Summary of NRPA presentation on special parks districts. National Recreation and Parks Association, 2011.

⁴⁰ <http://www.minneapolisarks.org/default.asp?PageID=1077>

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The parks are considered the “jewel in the crown” of the city. A 2009 report found that 99 percent of Minneapolis residents polled saw the parks and lakes as a unique and valuable asset for the city. Ninety-six percent favorably rated the quality, overall appearance and maintenance of the system.⁴¹

The MPRB works to engage an increasingly diverse city with unique programs and services. The key driver to the development of parks, amenities and programs is 2007-2020 Comprehensive Plan which articulates the vision, goals and strategies for the park system through 2020. It helps the Park Board keep pace with an evolving city, manage its resources and provide quality park and recreation services for the benefit of individuals, communities and the environment. Park Board Commissioners unanimously approved the 2007-2020 Comprehensive Plan on October 17, 2007. It has since been incorporated into the City of Minneapolis comprehensive plan, The Minneapolis Plan for Sustainable Growth, which was approved by the Metropolitan Council on July 22, 2009.⁴²

Bend Park and Recreation District, Bend OR

The Bend Park and Recreation District is a special taxing district, separate from the City of Bend. It is governed by a five member, elected Board of Directors and managed by an Executive Director.

During the early 1970's, The City of Bend Planning Commission resolved to form a special district with boundaries that included the nearby rapidly developing unincorporated areas. The petition appeared on the ballot on May 28, 1974, and the Bend Metro Park and Recreation (BMPRD) District was established by a vote of 2 to 1. Voters subsequently approved a tax base that has provided a feasible method to fund and operate a comprehensive park and recreation program.

What makes Bend unique is the city is growing and a large part of its appeal is the natural resources and opportunities for outdoor exercise. People interested in biking, hiking, river rafting, and fishing are attracted to Bend as a place to live. As a result, the community population is very vibrant and committed to health and wellness activities. What makes the District a great model? The greatest attributes for Bend are the resources they have. The District is known for its parks, which is no surprise as they hold triple the amount of acreage as national standards suggest. There is also river rafting along the Deschutes River that runs through town. The quality of park maintenance is excellent and residents are greatly satisfied with the parks.

In addition to their parks, their two signature facilities are the Juniper Recreation Center and the Senior Center. Almost 60 percent of households use the Juniper Center, which is significantly higher usage than comparable communities, according to the database of agencies from Leisure Vision, a national firm that does needs assessment surveys of park and recreation agencies. Many of Bend's recreation programs have wait lists because the demand for services is so significant.

⁴¹ <http://www.minneapolisparcs.org/default.asp?PageID=70>

⁴² <http://www.minneapolisparcs.org/default.asp?PageID=933>

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Forty-five percent of their residents participate in recreation programs, which is also significantly higher than communities nationwide. According to the Leisure Vision database, 32 percent of households participate in programs.

Satisfaction rates of the community toward the District are extremely high, always in the 90th percentile of satisfaction. The District has an ongoing commitment to measuring community satisfaction every four to five years through a statistically valid survey process. This is supplemented by regular recreation program evaluations, online surveys, and other feedback mechanisms. The District uses community feedback in decisions related to the delivery of programs and services.

There has been an ongoing commitment toward planning. The District regularly updates both their comprehensive plan and strategic plan.

The agency has enjoyed stability in its leadership. The director and his direct reports have all been there for more than 10 years. The stability of leadership has attributed to the success.

Kettering, Ohio Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Arts

The Kettering Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Arts (KPRC) is a city department, governed by a city council and includes a parks and recreation advisory board. Kettering historically has been well known for its excellence in parks and recreation. Kettering, similar to many Michigan communities, has experienced decreasing tax revenues. The Department has positioned itself for sustainability through efforts such as efficiency improvements, improving pricing processes, and relying more on volunteers and alternative revenue. The Department was successful in getting voter approval for a \$12 million bond referendum for general park and recreation improvements.

Kettering has many facilities, including a Senior Center, Ice Arena, two Recreation/Fitness Centers, arts center, farm, skate park, and new environmental education center, the Habitat. The skate park is unique in its design and has been written up in the National Recreation and Park Magazine and USA Today. Several years ago, the concept for a skate park in Kettering was brought up in a focus group. This resulted in the first-of-its-kind street-skating plaza of approximately 40,000 square feet and is designed for street skateboarding by incorporating urban terrain elements such as benches, rails and ledges. Unlike most modern day skate parks that consist of stark vertical ramps and half pipes, the skate plaza resembles a public square in a town or city by incorporating landscaping and art to create a multi-use park.

The Habitat is a facility dedicated toward informing residents about the importance of natural resource conservation. This is also an example of a creative facility. Kettering is well known for its excellent leadership. The Department has developed a culture to support innovative thinking and is reflected in creative programs, services, and facilities. Along with Bend, Kettering has a long time commitment to planning, resident input, and survey research. Previous planning and research efforts include: 2004 Pricing and Organizational Analysis, 2005 Financial Analysis, 2006 Parks Master Plan, 2006 Program Needs Assessment, 2007 Search Institute Survey, 2007 Senior Needs Assessment, 2008 Attitude & Interest Survey and 2008 Facility Master Plan, and 2010 Strategic Plan.

Charleston County, SC Park and Recreation Commission

The Charleston County Park and Recreation Commission (CCPRC) was established as a special purpose public service district in the state of South Carolina. This is another example of an agency that has unique facilities. The agency is an economic driver in the region with its regional facilities. In addition, the agency is nationally known for its work in cost recovery, revenue generation, and pricing.

Their non-tax revenue percentage is significantly higher than the national average performance of 35% by special districts, according to NRPA. Their facility mix and services were intentionally selected specifically to not duplicate services of local municipalities by offering passive sites, outdoor recreation, environmental education, campgrounds, and public beach access. They have three beach parks, three aquatic parks, and campgrounds and cottages, which do very well.

Their facilities tend to be more regional in nature than local governments. In addition, they have programs targeted toward groups and corporations. Their corporate services such as corporate outings and rentals are a significant revenue producer for the Commission. They also have a challenge course for teambuilding and a variety of party services, such as Geocache Parties.

The majority of their parkland of 9,526 acres is undeveloped. Within the last few years, the Commission has doubled the size of the system with land purchases, in part, by Charleston County Half-Cents Sales Tax Greenbelt Funds.

CCPRC is another agency that has had experience with planning initiatives. It is currently undergoing a master plan process and has relied significantly on resident input in their planning processes.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Conclusion 1: Parks and recreation in Kent County is best described as good, not great.

Kent County residents enjoy access to parks at or above the national average. While rural residents have further to travel to a park than do residents in more urbanized area, the total acreage available in the county is good. Access to recreation programming varies widely and, in general, appears to fall behind national averages (although this is harder to assess given the wide range of organizations that provide some form of recreational programming). Funding for parks and recreation throughout the communities in Kent County also appears to fall below national averages.

Conclusion 2: There is a broadly shared view that parks and recreation are key to the quality of life in Kent County, but different agencies have different priorities and there is currently no shared vision for a common approach across jurisdictions.

It is not within the purpose of this report to answer the questions “Is good, good enough?” Clearly for many in the community and on the Citizens Committee, the answer is *no*. For some, an average amount of park acreage is not sufficient and they will argue for additional spending on land acquisition and preservation. Those interested in active recreation will argue that the limited availability of trails, sports fields and park amenities is unacceptable. Others will argue that the community needs additional recreational programming. Still others see the decline of parks funding and maintenance, particularly in the City of Grand Rapids, and view it as unacceptable.

While there appears to be broad community consensus on the value of parks and recreation, there also appears to be a wide variability of views on priorities and appropriate levels of funding. In addition, advocacy groups tend to be focused on specific areas or specific issues and are not advocating broadly for parks and recreation to create a joint vision.

Input from the Citizen’s Committee suggests a strong desire to develop a regional vision for vibrant parks and recreation amenities and services, which will help focus changes in the most beneficial manner for Kent County residents.

The example of the City of Jackson and Jackson County is an important precautionary tale. As demonstrated in that effort, without shared vision, values and priorities, collaboration becomes an expensive and disappointing strategy.

Conclusion 3: Parks and recreation agencies throughout Kent County have faced significant budget reductions. In some jurisdictions, continued economic challenges and associated declines in parks and recreation spending threaten the quality of parks and access to recreation opportunities. At the same time, some communities with dedicated funding sources continue to maintain services in these challenging times.

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Funding for parks and recreation in Kent County lags national averages and in some communities has seen significant reductions. There is wide variation in the level of parks and recreation spending from one community to the next in Kent County. Parks and recreational opportunities are central to the quality of life here, as they are in any community. Communities with parks millages have not seen the decline that other communities have experienced, although declining property values have had a negative impact.

For most municipal parks agencies in Kent County, further budget reductions will likely result in noticeable changes in the quality and availability of parks and recreation services. As noted by members of the Citizens Committee, “doing more with less is no longer an option; less means less.”

Continued economic challenges, rising costs and competing priorities threaten further decline. Understanding the value produced by parks and recreation and continuing to invest in these is essential to maintaining the high quality of life that Kent County residents enjoy.

Conclusion 4: Kent County parks and recreation agencies are relatively efficient.

The case for consolidation and collaboration generally revolves around efficiency. In many cases, the opportunity to achieve municipal efficiencies through consolidation is obvious and the return-on-investment significant. Many Michigan communities have consolidated 911 dispatch operations. Here is a case where there were multiple redundant public safety answering points (PSAPs), each with very expensive dispatch equipment. Combining operations reduces overall equipment acquisition and maintenance costs and the consolidated center can provide the same service level with fewer staff than was necessary to staff all the PSAPs when they operated independently.

We did not find comparable opportunities for improved efficiencies in parks and recreation. Municipal agencies and schools share a significant number of parks and recreation staff with other functions. These agencies also receive much of their maintenance support from public works or other similar functions. Kent communities have shed most specialized equipment, such as bucket trucks, in favor of contracting for specialized services as needed. With respect to more general equipment, different agencies tend to need the equipment at the same time and there are limits to how far equipment can be transported without incurring long (inefficient) transit times. For these reasons, we did not identify any significant redundancies in equipment or operations. Although there are similar programs offered in multiple communities, these seem to respond to a local need and do not qualify as redundant.

To some degree, the efficiencies are the result of budget cuts that have taken effect in recent years. Parks and recreation agencies have looked for ways to trim operations and maximize the use of municipal resources in order to maintain a good parks and recreation systems.

Exhibit 6.1 summarizes the sources and potential for operational efficiencies in Kent County parks and recreation agencies.

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Exhibit 6.1 Sources and Assessment of Potential Efficiencies in Kent County Parks and Recreation

Source	Current situation
• Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staffing was difficult to measure as much is integrated elsewhere in responding jurisdictions• Staffing already cut
• Capital equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not a significant amount of specialized equipment• Outsourcing occurring• Agencies tend to need the equipment at the same time• Limited opportunities (geographic limit)
• Redundancies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No significant redundancies identified

Certainly more can be done with more resources and, under the right circumstance, benefit from a larger agency with independent governance (see below). But if the question is “can we do more with less?” The answer appears to be “no.”

Conclusion 5: There are strong examples of parks and recreation collaboration in Kent County.

As we noted in Finding 7 and elsewhere, there is a substantial level of inter-jurisdictional cooperation in parks and recreation agencies in Kent County. The two existing multi-jurisdictional authorities are strong models of parks and recreation collaboration. Other relationships are formalized through facility use agreements and other forms of contract. In addition, some jurisdictions report inter-jurisdictional relationships that operate quite informally.

While the formality and focus of these partnerships varies, we found that most jurisdictions that participated in this study were engaged in some level of cooperation with some other jurisdiction or service provider. Where economics, geography, capacity and needs align, cooperative relationships are being pursued for parks and recreation throughout Kent County.

In our recommendations, we looked to build upon, rather than replace, this history of collaboration. We believe Kent County parks and recreation agencies will benefit from additional collaborative structures and funding opportunities.

Conclusion 6: In the absence of a governance structure and new funding sources, consolidation of parks and recreation agencies may yield improvements in recreation programming and some back office operations, but will not yield significant operational efficiencies or cost savings.

Consolidating agencies may seem an obvious strategy for reducing overhead, improving efficiency and strengthening parks and recreation in Kent County. The question becomes one of return-on-investment. The process of consolidation faces enormous organizational

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challenges and there are many structural barriers to combining funding where communities have dedicated millages. Combining agencies, each with inadequate funding, is not likely to produce a financially healthy agency, absent additional revenue. Additional revenue, usually in the form a tax levy, requires an effective governance structure to manage.

What we found across the State, is that the strongest agencies had the strongest independent governance, and in most cases, dedicated funding. Parks and recreation as a general fund department tends to not fare well in difficult economic times.

In Kent County, the only independent parks and recreation governance is in the Cedar Springs and Lowell area authorities. Starting with a shared vision, these communities built an appropriate governance structure with limited financial resources to address a well-defined community need. This approach to service enhancement with minimal increased costs is happening elsewhere in Michigan, and it is the foundation of our recommendations.

While dedicated funding (particularly a millage) goes hand-in-hand with an independent governance structure, we do not see this as a “chicken and egg” problem. Creating an independent governance structure as a platform for collaboration is the first step. This creates the opportunity for communities to come together to establish a more broadly held shared vision for parks and recreation and to begin advocating for additional resources.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

Our findings have characterized the state of parks and recreation as good, not great. Our challenge was to find a way to move beyond good in a situation where parks millage support is limited to a few communities, where there is no independent parks and recreation governance (outside the two small authorities) to build upon, and where there is a history of limited regional intergovernmental collaboration. Certainly, communities with parks millages and more resources are not interested in participating in anything that is perceived as a bailout of struggling agencies.

Given the current state of parks and recreation in Kent County, we had to find a solution that benefited all participating agencies, that produced a return on investment for participating agencies greater than what could not be achieved individually, that brought new resources to parks and recreation and that had a governance process that supported shared goals and decision making.

We considered the possibility of consolidating existing agencies but found it failed to achieve the criteria we listed above. As we discussed in Chapter 4, consolidation has a mixed record of success and is extraordinarily hard to do. In the absence of independent governance it is likely to lead to conflicts. In the absence of additional resources, it will produce no significant efficiencies.

Any discussion of additional resources leads to the question of a parks and recreation millage. We have documented in this report that **great** parks and recreation systems have dedicated tax revenue. Our view is that this is something Kent County residents will likely consider in the future, but at present, there is not a shared vision across communities that would generate support for the millage, and the question of how such a millage would be managed so as to add value to all the independent systems and communities remains unresolved. In the absence of an independent governance mechanism, the millage would be placed before the voters by a general legislative body; most likely the County Board of Commissioners.

A strategy for multijurisdictional parks and recreation collaboration

Our research suggests that there is a need to create a new infrastructure for county-wide parks and recreation intergovernmental cooperation that can continue to grow based on experience and need. The new authority can benefit all participating communities and achieve results that could not be achieved by existing agencies working independently. A new authority could also be a mechanism to pursue, accept and distribute public grant monies and private philanthropic support. A new authority will also establish independent parks and recreation governance based upon multi-jurisdictional participation. At the same time, this new authority does not threaten local control of existing resources.

We see the authority as undertaking projects that add value to participating agencies (and offer six specific suggestions in Recommendation 2). This is an overlay authority. It does not replace or consolidate existing agencies. We see it doing projects that the existing agencies cannot do alone.

A new authority can also be a mechanism to pursue a parks and recreation millage should the participating communities decide to do so at some point in the future. While we do not see this as an initial goal, it is a question that may eventually go before the voters should the authority successfully develop a shared vision for parks and recreation across the county.

We believe that the following three broad recommendations are a critical starting point for Kent County communities to join forces to move parks and recreation from *good to great*:

Recommendation 1: Create a Kent Communities Park and Recreation Authority under PA 321.

A new authority, with a broadly defined purpose, will provide a platform for many initiatives that support and expand support for parks and recreation in Kent County. Communities can choose to opt in along the way (or out for that matter).

We discussed multiple approaches and enabling legislation in Chapter 4. We believe PA 321 of 2000 – The Recreation Authorities Act – offers the best mechanism for Kent County. This act allows for broad purpose, multijurisdictional participation and governance, and leaves open the door for a voter approved millage. In addition, authorities formed under this act have a record of success.

The Michigan Legislature recognized the need for collaboration in parks and recreation but also understood the enormous barriers to consolidation. The overlay authority allowed under PA 321 was created as a mechanism to address these barriers. Communities can come together to pursue common goals while continuing to support their own agencies.

A board comprised of representatives from participating communities can advocate for parks and recreation and act as fiduciary for multijurisdictional projects and funding. This board fills the gap in parks and recreation governance in Kent County. This may be an elected or appointed governing body. Board member qualifications, method of selection, terms of office, and method of filling of vacancies are determined by the participating jurisdictions and defined in the articles of incorporation. In addition, the board may include members from non-member jurisdictions (schools, P&R commissions, advocacy groups)

We believe this authority can pursue new resources and support programs that are of benefit to the residents across the county and that strengthen existing agencies. We offer specific recommendations for initial projects in the following recommendation. We believe, but have not formally tested, that there is the opportunity to secure private funding for these high-value, multijurisdictional projects.

In addition, we also recommend that this authority be created as a governing body with staff support that may be funded through grants and which may be contracted with individuals or participating agencies. Staff would be responsible for coordinating efforts of the Authority, working with partnering jurisdictions, facilitating communication and strategies to support the objectives of the Authority and to provide overall support for the Authority. In the interest of administrative efficiency, the authority would have dedicated staff but would not serve as the employer of record.

Also in the interest of administrative efficiency, we would expect one of the participating agencies to serve as fiduciary for the authority. Although this role could be fulfilled by any of the

participating agencies, absent their interest, it makes sense that Kent County government would fulfill this role as it does for other agencies.

In Chapter 9, we discuss the need for a multijurisdictional work group as the first step in establishing a new authority. Although many details will need to be addressed, there are 13 successful 321 Authorities in Michigan from which to learn.

Recommendation 2: Implement specific, high-value projects, that benefit multiple (all) parks and recreation jurisdictions in Kent County.

We believe that there are many worthy projects that can be achieved through a new level of collaboration and coordination in Kent County. Each of the six projects we have identified here delivers value to the county as a whole and to individual agencies.

We should note that the six suggestions offered here can be achieved without the creation of a new authority. That said, it seems they are more likely to succeed under a well-defined structure for collaboration. What is more, there is a greater potential for external funding (State and private monies) when pursued through a collaborative structure that can act as the fiduciary and project manager.

1. Shared parks and recreation web platform

Emerging technology offers opportunities for enhanced customer service, inter-jurisdictional collaboration and operational efficiency. We believe a common web platform can increase citizen participation in programming, and make interacting with the public much more efficient. In addition, a common, multijurisdictional web platform presents parks and recreation in Kent County as whole to the public who cares little about jurisdictional boundaries.

A common web platform can allow citizens to explore parks, view trail maps and get current information on special events around the county. It also would allow them to see recreational programming offerings, register and pay online.

We have discussed the limited use of technology in our findings (Chapter 3). We recognize that technology is expensive. Multijurisdictional systems dramatically reduce the cost of technology to individual agencies and offer the potential for a significant return on investment.

While we are not recommending any specific solution, we recognize one provider that has been offering a web-based solution for several years now. Active.Net offers a full featured recreation management solution. They can use their existing international web product to create a countywide specific application. This would offer a common citizen web portal for program registration and information as well as a common marketing tool for participating agencies.

This system can provide a single portal for all participating jurisdictions, but also allow each community to have their own content. Easy-to-use website content management software allows non-technical staff in each jurisdiction to update and manage information about their parks and programs.

A system such as this could cost as much \$600,000 to implement, but with 20 participating communities, the cost is as little as \$30,000 and well below the cost of purchasing technology such as this on their own. It is possible that these costs could be offset by private support for a multijurisdictional web project or through grant funding through the State.

2. Multi-jurisdictional planning

We note in Chapter 3 the absence of multijurisdictional planning in Kent County. We believe that collaboration on park development and recreational programming must begin with common planning that supports a Countywide view of needs and services.

Even in the absence of a new authority, this work makes sense and can help develop a shared vision for regional parks and recreation. As we have noted, the shared vision is the real driver in moving from good to great and makes the case for support for additional funding.

Initially, shared planning may be narrowly focused around specific programming needs and obvious multijurisdictional projects such as trail development. Ultimately, we see the need for multijurisdictional comprehensive, master planning.

A park master plan document consists of three parts: the Background and Existing Conditions, the General Management Plan, and the Conceptual Development Plan. While the background information serves as the basis for decision making, the General Management Plan and Conceptual Development Plan describe how to best protect park resources, provide quality visitor experiences, manage visitation and visitor use, and serves as a blueprint for future park development. The plan serves as a long-range vision (10-20 year timeframe) for future development and programming.⁴³

3. Common metrics and reporting

As we mentioned in the beginning of this report, getting data about parks and recreation throughout the county was difficult. In most cases, the information required extraordinary effort to get and in some cases was simply not available. This study was driven, in part, by the need to have a comprehensive inventory of parks and recreation in the county. We believe the need for this kind of information will continue and that efforts to streamline data collection and reporting should be made.

There is a considerable effort in parks and recreation to establish performance measures and standards. We relied heavily upon the National Recreation and Parks Association's PRORAGIS database for this study and encourage Kent County parks and recreation agencies to participate in the NRPA system. (None do at present.) This will provide common information to evaluate efforts and inform decision making regarding parks and recreation.

Alternatively, the Michigan Recreation and Parks Association is developing a Michigan data collection and reporting system for parks and recreation. This offers another opportunity for formalized data collection and standardized reporting.

⁴³ Fairfax County Park Authority.

As with multijurisdictional planning, this may be accomplished without a new authority. That said, an authority could establish a countywide parks and recreation dashboard to demonstrate the value of parks and recreation to the participating communities. It would also benefit from having readily available data to support programming decisions.

Above all, good data about parks and recreation drives planning and policy making. It supports continuous improvement in agencies operations and it enhances transparency and accountability in local government.

4. Common hiring system for recreation program staff

During our discussion with agency staff, we heard of some difficulties in finding staff for recreational programming. We also noted that agencies of all sizes were recruiting, qualifying, hiring, and paying many part-time and temporary staff. This can be an administrative burden and local agencies could benefit from a centralized system.

For some years now, schools have outsourced the hiring of substitute teachers to a third party vendor through the Intermediate School District (ISD). This model makes sense for recreation programming as well. Instructors, coaches, game officials and other contingent personnel all have to be recruited, qualified (including background checks), assigned and paid just like substitute teachers.

A centralized database can also help recreation agencies connect with qualified staff and create an opportunity for qualified staff to market their services more broadly. An individual instructor may wish to be placed in multiple communities if the demand for his or her services is there.

Working with a vendor that has processes that are tested and proven effective to manage contingent hiring offers many advantages. These include:

- Hiring efficiencies and reduced costs
- Standardized hiring practices and compliance
- Provides value in a consolidated services approach to staffing
- Broader availability of qualified staff (consolidation increases the numbers of quality staff and creates competition for a position)
- Access to expensive HR software
- Standardized training
- Ease of communication with contingent employees
- Simplified application and approval process for temporary staff

As with the ISD, the new authority can develop a master contract with the vendor and participating agencies can work with the vendor to meet specific needs of the community. The cost of these services can be shared by participating agencies or covered by a small addition to registration costs for program participants.

5. Joint marketing

We noted in our findings the limited marketing of parks and recreational programming by agencies. A joint authority could sponsor many types of marketing. This could include the web-based approach we noted above as well as other media approaches. This marketing approach

could support specific programming and events in local communities, as well as help market the region to potential visitors, businesses and residents. Collaborative marketing can help stretch limited marketing budgets and increase non-tax revenue.

6. Shared programming

An authority can support the design, implementation and marketing of programming across jurisdictions. Where it makes sense, communities can come together to offer programs and cross-registration opportunities to fill gaps in programming. This helps make fuller use of facilities and can help generate additional revenue.

We noted in Chapter 3 that programming for special needs population was limited in Kent County. A countywide authority can work with participating jurisdictions to develop programs for serving people with disabilities. That model has been used in special education all over and has been successful in creating special recreation associations in Illinois. Pooling the population and dollars makes good sense when there is limited need, high costs and requirements for specially trained staff.

Recommendation 3: Support the formation of additional multi-jurisdictional authorities where there is a strong case and community support for collaboration.

We have discussed the existing local parks and recreation collaboration in Kent County and have paid special attention to the success of the Cedar Springs Area Parks and Recreation Commission and the Lowell Area Recreation Authority. We believe these are effective models of collaboration and that other communities in Kent County may benefit from forming similar agencies.

While we do not have a specific recommendation for the configuration of such an entity, we believe the new authority could also serve to provide technical support to communities that wish to join forces to collaboratively develop parks or offer recreational programming (or do both) to meet the specific needs of two or more local jurisdictions.

Again, our point with the new authority is that it does not replace local agencies or prevent new ones from forming. Instead, it serves as a platform for collaboration and delivers value to all communities beyond what they can produce individually. It is this value-added approach that makes the creation of a new authority a worthwhile endeavor for the citizens of Kent County.

Chapter 8: Phase II – Establishing the Authority

The recommendations presented in Chapter 7 will require additional effort and coordination before they can be fully implemented. The Citizens Committee, in the initial Request for Proposals, anticipated this study would require a second phase for this purpose. In this chapter, we present a proposed approach to implementation, with a focus on achieving the initial study objectives of improving parks and recreation services across Kent County.

Exhibit 8.1 provides a preliminary work plan that moves the recommendations from concept to action. We anticipate that within two years, an authority can be established, have implemented one or more of the initial projects recommended here and have developed a strategic plan for long-term support of parks and recreation in Kent County.

Exhibit 8.1
Phase II: Preliminary Implementation Plan for Regional Parks and Recreation Authority

Task Number	Task	Tentative Completion Date
1.0	Presentation & Discussion of Parks Study Recommendations	
1.1	Presentation to Kent County Board of Commissioners and invitations to funders and local units of government to attend presentation.	September, 2012
1.2	Host meetings with local units of government including the Township Supervisors Association and the Urban Mayors and Managers group to present findings of Parks Study.	November, 2012
1.3	Seek feedback and input from local units of government regarding interest in participating in the development of the Authority.	December, 2012
1.4	Create work group of representatives of interested communities appointed by local communities to create framework for Authority	March, 2013
2.0	Coordinate Work Group to draft working documents for the formation of the Authority	
2.1	Identify jurisdiction of proposed Authority, required staff and consulting support	May, 2013
2.2	Assess community support and define priorities	June, 2013
2.3	Draft authority board composition/representation	July 2013
2.4	Draft bylaws and necessary governance documents	August, 2013
2.5	Present draft bylaws to local units for review and discussion	September, 2013
2.6	Request community decision to participate in Authority pending approval of the bylaws by each local unit of government.	October, 2013

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Task Number	Task	Tentative Completion Date
3.0	Establish Authority	
3.1	Begin authority operation and set meeting calendar	December, 2013
3.2	Identify initial project(s) and develop work plan(s)	February, 2014
3.3	Establish initial project(s) budget(s)	March, 2014
3.4	Secure initial funding	May, 2014
3.5	Begin implementation of initial project(s)	December, 2014
4.0	Develop long-range strategic plan	June, 2014

Local review and decision making

The initial task of implementing the study's recommendations will be to determine the level of interest in a regional multi-jurisdictional parks and recreation authority. This may be best accomplished through a series of meetings with local unit representatives, to review the findings of the study and the resulting recommendations. These meetings would be an opportunity for each municipality to more fully understand the potential benefits and obligations of participating in an authority, as well as discuss concerns and technical questions that may arise.

Following the meetings, each local board, council or commission would be asked to determine if they would like their community to participate further in implementing the recommendations set forth. While participation would be encouraged, we recognize that some communities may choose to not continue with the process, and others may continue initially then opt out later. Similarly, some local units may at first opt out, but later join in the formation of an authority or voluntarily adopt other recommendations of the study. Agreeing at this point to continue would mean appointing a local representative to join the task force, which would be charged with more fully developing the structure, purpose and scope of a regional authority.

We would hope that this initial review and decision making to be completed by the spring of 2013.

Implement work group to establish authority

The first requirement of the work group would be to identify leadership roles and a protocol for moving forward. The leaders of the work group might be expected to contribute a greater effort, but would share in the decision-making process, so each community is assured an equal voice in the process. The goal would be to encourage ideas and participation, in an effort to develop a structure and scope of an authority that is most likely to add the greatest value to the parks and recreation services across all participating governments.

Some monies have been secured through the State Economic Vitality Incentive Program (EVIP) to fund the efforts of the work group. It will be necessary for the work group to seek support from participating agencies and perhaps outside consultants. Planning, facilitation, finance and legal services are all likely areas of support that will be needed by the work group.

Having formed the work group, the next step would be to assess the degree of community support and define the priorities of an authority. At this phase of the process, the work group members would begin establishing a framework for the authority, including the composition and representation of the governing board. A number of possible arrangements should be considered, to ensure the best model is put in place as the Authority is formed.

A critical decision to be made by the work group will be the authorizing legislation under which the authority would be formed. Although we have recommended the formation of a parks and recreation authority under PA 321 we recognize that several other options are available. The task force may consider forming under PA 7, the Urban Cooperation Act, as was done by the Lowell and Cedar Springs Authorities. We suspect the decision will reflect the work group's thinking about a millage, as different legislation has different rules or may prohibit the authority levying a millage. The work group will need to consider the pros and cons of each option in light of their interests.

Depending on the legislation selected, a number of decisions will need to be made regarding the bylaws, operating structure, funding, and limitations of the new authority. Care should be given to ensure the newly developed authority does not conflict with existing agency objectives, scope or funding. Ideally, the authority would enhance existing services, and be able to leverage available resources to gain increased efficiencies, funding opportunities and service enhancements.

Prior to seeking approval of the new authority by each participating municipality, the work group will establish an initial work plan and identify potential funds to initiate some projects. Local units of government are more likely to support the authority if its potential benefits can be clearly demonstrated in the first year of operation. Prior to formal implementation of the authority, the governing bodies of each member community would have to approve a resolution to join and participate in the joint authority.

Once formally established, the board of the authority would be appointed as described in the bylaws. With the appointment of the board, the authority could officially request funding for approved projects, and begin administering a joint parks and recreation authority serving countywide agencies and residents. As noted previously, the purpose of the authority would be to improve access, availability and quality of parks and recreation services across jurisdictional lines.

We expect to see the authority to be official by the fall of 2013 and implementation of one or more initial projects to begin by the end of 2013.

Develop long-range strategic plan

With this focus in mind, the authority would likely engage member communities in a long-term visioning and strategic planning process. Public participation in this process will help define how parks and recreation services and amenities across the county could best move from **good to great!**

Appendix A: Best practice agencies, mission and core values statements

Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board⁴⁴

Our mission reflects why the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board exists.

Mission: The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board shall permanently preserve, protect, maintain, improve, and enhance its natural resources, parkland, and recreational opportunities for current and future generations.

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board exists to provide places and recreation opportunities for all people to gather, celebrate, contemplate, and engage in activities that promote health, well-being, community, and the environment.

The vision statement and the four vision themes will guide future development, operations, and maintenance of the Minneapolis park system into 2020.

VISION TO 2020

Vision Statement In 2020, the Minneapolis park system is a premier destination that welcomes and captivates residents and visitors. The park system and its beauty are part of daily life and shape the character of Minneapolis. Natural, cultural, artistic, historical, and recreational resources cultivate outstanding experiences, health, enjoyment, fun, and learning for all people. The park system is sustainable, well-maintained and safe, and meets the needs of individuals, families, and communities. The focus on preserving land continues, with a strong emphasis on connecting people to the land and each other. Aware of its value to their lives, residents are proud stewards and supporters of an extraordinary park and recreation system.

As a renowned and award winning park and recreation system, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board delivers:

Vision Theme 1: Urban forests, natural areas, and waters that endure and captivate

GOALS

- Sound management techniques provide healthy, diverse, and sustainable natural resources.
- Healthy boulevard trees connect all city residents to their park system.
- Residents and visitors enjoy and understand the natural environment.
- People and the environment benefit from the expansion and protection of natural resources.

⁴⁴ <http://www.minneapolisparcs.org/default.asp?PageID=53>

- Knowledgeable stewards and partners generously support the system's natural resources.

Vision Theme2: Recreation that inspires personal growth, healthy lifestyles, and a sense of community

GOALS

- People play, learn, and develop a greater capacity to enjoy life.
- Residents, visitors, and workers enjoy opportunities to improve health and fitness.
- People connect through parks and recreation.
- Volunteers make a vital difference to people, parks, and the community.
- Parks provide a center for community living.

Vision Theme 3: Dynamic parks that shape city character and meet diverse community needs

GOALS

- Parks shape an evolving city.
- Park facility renewal and development respects history and focuses on sustainability, accessibility, flexibility, and beauty.
- Focused land management supports current and future generations.
- Financially independent and sustainable parks prosper.
- Through outreach and research, park and recreation services are relevant today and tomorrow.
- Easily accessible information supports enjoyment and use of the park and recreation system.

Vision Theme 4: A safe place to play, celebrate, contemplate, and recreate

GOALS

- Positive recreation experiences and welcoming parks prevent crime.
- Residents, park visitors, and staff make safe choices in the parks.
- Intervention and communication reduces safety concerns.
- Parks are safe and welcoming by design.
- Communities, public and private partners, and staff cooperate to promote safety.

We apply the following values to all of our work:

Sustainability: Meet current park and recreation needs without sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs by balancing environmental, economic, and equity concerns.

Visionary Leadership Respect the vision and leadership that built the park and recreation system and recognize the need for ongoing leadership in achieving excellence.

Safety Work safely to support a thriving work environment and an outstanding park experience for visitors.

Responsiveness and Innovation Anticipate and thoughtfully respond to the diverse needs of the city's communities, continually seeking ways to better deliver park and recreation services.

Independence and Focus Independence allows the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board to focus on providing and obtaining the resources necessary to accomplish its mission and form effective, responsible partnerships.

We consider the following principles when making decisions that have a district or system-wide impact.

Identified Community Need and Demographics

Emphasis will be placed on researching community needs and demographics when considering program and facility delivery.

Quality versus Quantity

The amenities provided to meet the park and recreation needs of communities will be high quality and provided at a sustainable level. Amenities that have completed their useful life-cycle, especially those with a blighted appearance, will be removed and, as funding becomes available, replaced with new amenities.

Embracing Technology

Decision-making will embrace technology to better serve the community.

Fostering a New Face for Partnerships

Non-traditional partners that provide new opportunities for residents and are consistent with the organization's mission will be encouraged.

Focusing on the Activity, Then the Infrastructure

After evaluation of what the Park Board currently provides, the status of other service providers, and existing infrastructure, infrastructure will be provided to meet the service goals for that activity. Service goals for an activity will be based on demographics of an area, identified community need, and the identified target audience for the activity.

Sustainable Rate

A sustainable park system will be supported by decisions that provide services at a sustainable rate, such as providing infrastructure that can be reasonably maintained, setting realistic

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program and service delivery targets, or modifying land management techniques to increase efficiency.

Bend Park and Recreation District⁴⁵

Mission statement:

To enhance the vitality of our community by promoting healthy lifestyles and enriching Bend's unique character with exceptional park and recreation services.

We value:

Excellence by striving to set the standard for quality programs, parks and services through leadership, vision, innovation and dedication to our work.

Environmental Sustainability by helping to protect, maintain and preserve our natural and developed resources.

Fiscal Accountability by responsibly and efficiently ensuring the financial health of the district today and for generations to come.

Inclusiveness by reducing physical, social and financial barriers to our programs, facilities and services.

Partnerships by fostering an atmosphere of cooperation, trust and resourcefulness with our patrons, coworkers, and other organizations.

Customers by interacting with people in a responsive, considerate and efficient manner.

Safety by promoting a safe and healthy environment for all who work and play in our parks, facilities and programs.

Staff by honoring the contributions of each employee and volunteer, and recognizing them as essential to accomplishing our mission.

Kettering, Ohio Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Arts⁴⁶

Mission

We provide parks, recreation and cultural arts spaces, places and programs that make Kettering a premiere community to live, work and play.

Vision

We strive to enhance the quality of life for all residents and to distinguish Kettering as a community of choice.

⁴⁵ Bend Metro Park and Recreation District, Adopted Budget for Fiscal Year 2011-12.

⁴⁶ http://www.ketteringoh.org/newweb/departments/recreation/rec_deptinfo.php

Charleston County, SC Park and Recreation Commission⁴⁷

Charleston County Park & Recreation Commission is making a commitment to a new set of Core Values. This effort will ensure that we leave some blue up above and some green on the ground. Adopting these important values ensures a thriving park system for our children and grandchildren.

Community Enrichment

Enriching lives through education and programs

Fun

Delivering fun to customers

Health and Wellness

Providing and promoting healthy lifestyle opportunities

Diversity

Fostering diverse populations of vendors, employees, and customers

Accessibility

Providing accessibility through affordable options and a variety of offerings

Leadership

Providing professional staff development

Exceptional Customer Service

Always focusing on you

Quality

Striving for quality throughout the park system

Safety

Ensuring safe and secure environments

Stewardship

Preserving and conserving cultural, natural, and historical resources

Building a Legacy

Maintaining a vision for the future while sustaining a healthy park system

⁴⁷ <http://www.ccprc.com/index.aspx?nid=1110>